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# Georgia Journal of READING

Volume 38 Number 1 Spring 2015



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# Georgia Journal of READING

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# Message From the Editors

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BY CHRISTINE A. DRAPER, PH.D. AND DR. LINA B. SOARES, PH.D.

Welcome to the spring 2015 edition of the *Georgia Journal of Reading*. This time of year often brings rain and cloudy skies but remember as Bing Crosby sang, “Let a smile be your umbrella” on a rainy day. This edition offers a broad range of topics for educators in all fields which can bring a smile to everyone’s face! The editors would like to thank the authors who submitted manuscripts for review, as well as the reviewers who donate their time to provide feedback and revision suggestions for the articles in this publication.

The first article, *Middle School Literacy Coaches: Perceptions of Roles and Responsibilities* by Katie Stover and Maryann Mraz, is a reprint from the spring 2013 journal. The original author wished to acknowledge the second author of this piece. This article describes a qualitative study conducted to explore the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and to compare them with the International Reading Association’s recommended standards for literacy coaches (IRA, 2006). The authors found that when literacy coaches have a thorough understanding of the diverse needs of adult learners, successful coaching techniques, knowledge of effective instructional practices, and clear roles and responsibilities, they have a greater potential to promote changes in classroom practice.

Marie Holbein and Jennifer Farist’s piece titled, *An Analysis of Teachers’ Discourse and Their Perceptions Concerning the Use of Questioning and Feedback During Reading Instruction In Third-Grade Classrooms*, describes a qualitative study that investigated the potentially powerful instructional tool ‘teacher talk’ during elementary reading instruction. The authors point out that to take advantage of this instructional tool, teachers must become aware of their current practices, intentionally use questions and feedback for multiple purposes, and strive to move students more quickly to a level of independent learning by actively involving them during instruction.

Trevor Thomas Stewart and Emily Pendergrass remind readers that it is important to ascertain how students’ social relationships can inform teachers’ efforts to create authentic learning experiences and increase student motivation to develop life-long reading habits. Their article, *Reading, Motivation, and the Power of Social Relationships: Learning from Middle School Students in a Title I Reading Classroom*, examines middle school students’ perceptions of reading and the connections between social relationships and reading.

Margaret Lehman’s *How Can Teachers Motivate Reluctant Readers?* reminds one that classroom activities can serve as a way to both encourage and stifle student motivation to read. Lehman’s study supports the notion that children who have a good attitude toward reading and are motivated to read will spend more time reading, which can lead to higher achievement.

Finally, Beverly McKenna’s and Beverly Strauser’s, *Dictionary Projects: A Defining Moment in Literacy*, describes how you can easily get involved in providing dictionaries to your local community. Providing students with dictionaries can target inflection, vocabulary development, and gives students a resource that they can return to again and again.

During this rainy spring, please curl up with this edition of the *Georgia Journal of Reading* and let that smile be your umbrella today!

As winter draws to a close and spring quickly approaches, teachers throughout the state are looking forward to a much-deserved spring break. I hope you take the opportunity, during your spring break, to spend some time on your personal reading list. If you are like me, your "to read" list keeps growing everyday. I am looking forward to putting a dent in the stack of books resting on the edge of my desk in the upcoming spring break.

By the time you read this we will have held the Georgia Reading Association Juanita Abernathy Reading 'Awards. The awards ceremony was held on March 15. Winners from across the state of Georgia attended a recognition ceremony held at Warner Robbins. If your council did not participate you need to consider submitting nominees for the various awards in the upcoming year. Award applications can be found on the GRA website.

You should have received communication from the International Reading Association about the name change that has occurred. We will now be called the International Literacy Association (ILA). For the immediate future, Georgia Reading Association will retain its current name. The executive board will be meeting to make recommendations about whether or not we will change our name to align with the international association and what the timeline will be.

You will want to be sure to mark you calendars for the Conference to be held July 18 – 20. The International Conference will be held in Saint Louis this year. You don't want to miss out of the wonderful presentations, guest speakers, and author sessions.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to thank all of the State and Local Council officers and GRA Committee Chairman for their dedication to the Georgia Reading Association during this past year. It is through the dedication of hard working volunteers across the state that the Georgia Reading Association continues to exist.

*Beth Pendergraft*  
*President, Georgia Reading Association*

# Middle School Literacy Coaches: Perceptions of Roles and Responsibilities

BY KATIE STOVER, PH.D. AND MARYANN MRAZ, PH.D.

## Abstract

This article describes a qualitative study conducted to explore the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and to compare them with the International Reading Association's recommended standards literacy coaches (IRA, 2006). Four middle school literacy coaches, all employed at different middle schools within the same district in the southeastern United States participated in this study. Findings reveal some consistencies in roles such as building rapport and evaluation of literacy needs.

Adolescent literacy is a cornerstone of students' academic success (Wise, 2009). Students typically acquire basic skills that serve as the foundation for reading and writing in the elementary school years. In the middle grades however, students must build on those foundational skills to develop sophistication in their application of literacy strategies in order to comprehend a variety of texts across content areas. Concerns about adolescent literacy have been voiced consistently over the past two decades. Since 1992, periodic assessments of reading conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that the majority of U.S. students in grades 4 and 8 have scored at only a "basic" level of literacy. Similarly, researchers have found that one out of every four adolescents could not read well enough to identify the main idea in a passage or to comprehend informational text (Allington, 1994; Kamil, 2003).

Several initiatives have been undertaken in order to address adolescent literacy concerns. In 2005, for example, the federal initiative *Striving Readers* provided funding to school districts to raise reading achievement levels of secondary students by improving the quality of literacy instruction across the curriculum. *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006) identified fifteen critical elements of effective adolescent literacy and literacy programs, including professional development for teachers that is long



term and ongoing; interdisciplinary teacher teams that meet regularly to discuss student needs and to align instruction with those needs; and leadership from both administrators and faculty who have comprehensive knowledge of literacy teaching and learning.

Including instructional coaches as part of the middle school literacy team, is one way in which schools seek to provide ongoing professional development and literacy leadership. Current research on literacy coaching supports the idea that, through job-embedded professional development, literacy coaches can contribute to improvements in the quality of teacher instruction and student literacy learning (Bean & Eisenberg, 2009; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Professional organizations, such as the International Reading Association, have compiled standards for reading professionals, with a focus on performance, suggested knowledge, and skills that these professional should possess. While some research has examined the role of literacy coaches at the elementary school level, little is known about the work of literacy coaches in middle school (Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008; Walpole & McKenna, 2004). This study sought to address that need by examining the roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and comparing those roles and responsibilities with the International Reading Association's recommended standards for literacy coaches (IRA, 2006).

The inclusion of literacy specialists to provide guidance and support has been widely accepted for many years. The roles these educators fulfill, however, have changed in recent years (Mraz, Algozzine, & Kissel, 2009; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the primary responsibility of reading specialists was to work with struggling readers in small groups or in pull-out programs, where students received specialized literacy instruction outside of their regular classrooms. Often, there was little collaboration between the classroom teacher and the reading specialist about the type of instruction a student received in the pull-out setting (Dole, 2004). Concerns about the effectiveness of these programs led to a shift toward in-class collaborative instruction between reading specialists and classroom teachers, the specialist's role was expanded from working solely with students to shared leadership and coaching responsibilities to improve the quality of classroom instruction (Bean, 2004; Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002).

Policy initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), and the Common Core State Standards (2010) have prompted educators and researchers to examine both the preparation and continuing education of literacy teachers (Bean, 2004). Shifting the role of a reading specialist from teaching students to coaching teachers has been one initiative designed to improve reading instruction by providing ongoing, consistent, and relevant professional development to teachers (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). There is a growing recognition that literacy coaches offer guidance and support to help teachers refine their instructional practices.

Still, variation in the roles these literacy professionals fulfill remains vague. Some focus specifically on supporting classroom teachers in their daily implementation of the school's literacy program (Guth & Pettengill, 2005; IRA, 2006). Others support teachers by working across subject areas or by providing general and specific professional development session (Dole, 2004). Yet others report that administrative tasks and paperwork consume much of their time (Dole & Donaldson, 2006). The occupational titles of those who do the work of literacy coaches are often as varied as the roles they fulfill. An International Reading Association survey found that over 89% are referred to as a "literacy coach" or a "reading coach" (IRA, 2006). Additional commonly used titles for professionals engaged in literacy coaching include specialist, facilitator, curriculum, instructional, reading specialist, literacy facilitator, or academic specialist. Other titles reference a place, such as a school building in which a literacy work

works (e.g. middle school literacy specialist).

The roles of middle school literacy coaches share some commonalities with elementary and secondary coaches. Walpole and McKenna (2004) explain that coaching models should adapt to the needs of the setting. All coaches regardless of level act as instructional leaders, provide professional development and resources to teachers, collaborate with colleagues, and use assessment to drive instruction. However, the roles of the middle school literacy coach are unique in that specific knowledge of how to assist middle school teachers in building a better understanding of content area reading, using textbooks effectively, and applying literacy strategies across subject areas are essential (IRA, 2000).

The roles of the middle school literacy coach are multifaceted and complex. Sturtevant (2003) and Toll (2005) explain that literacy coaches in middle and high schools are seen as teacher leaders, and may be expected to do any combination of the following: mentor teachers, observe classes, work with teacher teams, advise administrators on school wide literacy issues administer and analyze literacy assessments, and work with parents or community groups. While the potential responsibilities for middle school literacy coaches can be overwhelming, the International Reading Association (2006) has established four broad standards for the role of the literacy coach: (1). Skillful collaborators: collaborate with the school literacy team; promote positive relationships among school staff; address family literacy needs; (2). Skillful job-embedded coaches: provide professional development for teachers; demonstrate lessons; engage in classroom coaching for individual teachers; support content area reading, differentiated instruction, and materials acquisition; (3). Skillful evaluators of literacy needs: analyze data and monitor student progress; conduct assessments for individual students or groups of students; (4.) Skillful instructional strategists: know how reading and writing process relate within various content area disciplines.

The purpose of this study was an in-depth investigation of the roles and responsibilities of four middle school literacy coaches by addressing the following questions: 1). How do middle school literacy coaches define their roles and responsibilities? 2). How do the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches compare to the recommended standards defined by IRA for that role?

### **Statement of the Purpose**

Although literacy coaches have been studied at the elementary level (Walpole & McKenna, 2004), little research has been conducted related to the role of



literacy coaches at the middle school level. Professional organizations have provided guidelines for the work of middle school literacy coaches, however little is known about if and how these guidelines are put into practice. This study was conducted to examine the roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches and to compare those roles with the International Reading Association's recommended standards for literacy coaches (IRA, 2006). The author was interested in middle school literacy coaches' perspectives on the allocation of time, the definition of their roles and responsibilities, and how their daily roles and responsibilities compare with the recommended IRA standards for the role of the literacy coach at the middle school level. The following questions were examined from the perspectives of four middle school literacy coaches: How do middle school literacy coaches define their roles and responsibilities and how do the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches compare to the recommended IRA standards?

## Methodology

### **Participants and Context**

This study was conducted in a school district within the southeastern United States. The district served approximately 20,000 students representing a blend of urban, suburban, and rural regions. Four middle school literacy coaches participated in this study. Each participant was employed at a different middle school within the same district. All coaches had previously worked as middle school teachers teaching language arts, math, or science. Their transition to the role of the literacy coach had occurred within the previous one or two years, therefore, these participants were relatively new to the literacy coaching position.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

To better understand the roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches, data was collected from multiple sources including survey data, semi-structured interviews, and documents, such as daily logs and schedules. The interviews sought to ascertain participants' perspectives on their preparation for their position, their current roles and responsibilities, and the rewards and challenges of their work (see Appendix A).

A constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the qualitative data collected in the study. The transcripts were read multiple times to initiate the data analysis process. Codes were assigned based on the patterns in the participants' data. These codes were categorized into themes and labeled. To further investigate the roles and responsibilities of each participant, samples of weekly schedules and daily logs were requested from

each participant. The use of triangulation of multiple data sources allowed the researchers to make comparisons among the findings.

Additionally, each participant completed a survey (see Appendix B) that listed specific behaviors within each of the four standards for literacy coaches recommended by the International Reading Association. Following a model similar to Cassidy and Cassidy's "What's Hot, What's Not" survey (2008), participants were asked to rate whether each behavior was part of her current coaching role or not part of her current role. Each participant was also asked to indicate whether she believed that each behavior should be part of the coaching role or should not be part of the coaching role. The validity of the survey was grounded in the importance placed on each item by the International Reading Association's *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches* (2006).

## Findings

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

In response to the first research question, how do middle school literacy coaches define their roles and responsibilities, all four coaches reported that they fulfilled a variety of responsibilities influenced by the needs of teachers, the decisions of administration, and their own professional judgment. Three out of the four coaches reported consistencies in their daily roles and responsibilities in terms of spending time working with teachers in classrooms and providing professional development. As one coach stated in her interview, "I am a teacher, not an administrator." Three coaches saw themselves as supportive figures that collaborate with teachers in a non-evaluative manner. They viewed themselves as equals, learned from the teachers, and shared their own expertise. Through building rapport with teachers, the three coaches purported that they were able to create trusting relationships and increase teacher buy-in and participation.

These three literacy coaches described their role as comprised of tasks such as helping teachers to plan effective lessons, sharing ideas and resources, and providing feedback to help teachers reflect and continue to grow professionally. One referred to her job as "hopping around" from class-to-class and subject-to-subject in order to model strategies and coach individual teachers. The work coaches did with teachers varied based on the needs of each individual teacher. For example, one coach stated that for a teacher who needs more support, she gradually released the modeling process throughout an entire day with that teacher. During first period, the coach taught the lesson while the classroom teacher observed. Following reflection and debriefing, the coach and the teacher co-taught the second period

class in order to give the teacher more support before implementing the technique on her own. When the teacher was comfortable with the strategy, she then taught the lesson to another class while the literacy coach observed and provided feedback.

Three coaches reported that it was often necessary to conference with teachers in order to identify the teacher's needs and desired areas for professional development. According to the coaches, these conversations were crucial in helping the literacy coach design effective and appropriate support. Coaches worked across subject areas with all classes to model strategies and provide a variety of literacy support. For example, the biology teacher was dissecting frogs and invited the literacy coach into her class to pre-teach the necessary vocabulary for this unit of study. This same literacy coach did a read aloud about Pythagorean Theorem to an algebra class to tap their prior knowledge of the subject and model fluent reading. Later in the week, the literacy coach came back to the same math class to show the students how to read the word problem to determine and highlight key words while the teacher explained the steps of problem solving and the mathematical equations to solve the problems. All three literacy coaches reported that acquiring and sharing resource materials with teachers was an ongoing part of their role as a coach. For instance, one literacy coach noted that if students struggled with the concept of figurative language, she provided the teacher with helpful resources to teach and reinforce this concept.

While three out of the four literacy coaches reported similar findings about the daily work they do at their schools, one coach shared somewhat different roles and responsibilities. Instead of working in classrooms with teachers, this coach spent the majority of her time analyzing standardized test data and scheduling remediation and enrichment groups. She also did more operational tasks such as testing, and planning family movie nights and Accelerated Reader parties. She explained that there was a need for someone to analyze the data for the teachers because they simply did not have time to do so. Due to the extended amount of time spent on data analysis, this literacy coach only taught lessons sporadically. As she stated in the interview, "I don't have a lot of in-class time because teachers don't ask." Furthermore, she had no experience with planning and facilitating professional development for teachers. This literacy coach explained that she did not feel needed and, therefore, did not know what to do or how to allocate her time if the teachers did not explicitly ask for assistance.

### Time Allocation

Data collected from the interviews provided some

insight about the allocation of time for the middle school literacy coaches. Three of the literacy coaches reported spending approximately 75% of their time working in the classrooms with teachers, providing demonstration lessons, coaching, and debriefing. One coach spent little time working directly with teachers and spent more time behind the scenes organizing various programs and analyzing assessment data. The researcher planned to collect data in the form of a written daily log over the period of one month depicting how the literacy coaches' time was allocated. However, only one of the literacy coaches provided this data and reported the allocation of her time as follows:

- 27 hours conducting, facilitating, or analyzing assessments
- 23 hours planning professional development
- 22 hours in classrooms
- 21 ¼ hours in team meetings or discussions with teachers
- 15 ½ hours writing lesson plans
- 11 ½ hours conducting professional development
- 6 ½ hours in meetings such as staff meetings or literacy team meetings
- 4 ½ hours organizing and distributing materials to teachers
- 1 hour participating in professional development

### Challenges and Rewards

In addition to providing information about roles, responsibilities, and time allocation, analysis of the interview data revealed the challenges and rewards that literacy coaches reported experiencing as part of their work. All four coaches interviewed reported concern about unclear role expectations, particularly in their first year. One coach, in her second year of coaching at the time of this study, reported that she remained uncertain about how she was expected to spend her time.

While the literacy coaches faced many challenges, they also reported experiencing rewards in their work. One coach found the ability to work with all students and to fulfill a variety of roles to be refreshing. She shared that she felt rejuvenated with her new position after 21 years of teaching and "enjoys learning from and helping teachers." Additionally, three coaches expressed their belief that the opportunity to impact instruction and student achievement has the potential to create a broader impact across the school, not just within a single classroom. One coach stated that the eighth grade teachers closed the gap on the scores of their formative assessment and credited this success to the strategies the coach shared with them. Another coach reported, "I am passionate about the need to teach content area literacy strategies... if I was behind the door of my own language arts classroom, I would not be able to do that."

FIGURE 1

Standard 4: Skillful Instructional Strategists	Part of Current Role	Not Part of Current Role	Should Be Part of Current Role	Should Not Be Part of Current Role
Content Area Knowledge	4		4	
Provide Instruction to Students	2	2	2	2

**Alignment of Roles with the Standards**

The second research question addressed how the daily roles and responsibilities of middle school literacy coaches compared with the recommended IRA standards. Figure 1 summarizes the coaches responses to the survey that asked what standards were part of their current coaching role and what standards they believed should be part of their coaching role.

All four coaches noted that all aspects of Standard 1: Skillful Collaborator and Standard 2: Skill Job-Embedded Coaches were part of their role as a literacy coach and should be part of their role. They also reported that Standard 3: Examining Student Work to Analyze Trends and Results, and Conducting Assessment were part of their current role and should be part of their role. However, the coaches’ responses were not consistent with one aspect of Standard 3. Part of this standard includes interpretation of assessment to help faculty to understand different assessment tools and how to use them diagnostically to guide instruction and enhance teacher effectiveness. While all four literacy coaches believed this should be part of their jobs, only two coaches reported this as something they do on a regular basis.

Standard 4: Skillful Instructional Strategists is broken into two subsections. All four coaches reported that they have appropriate content area knowledge of how reading and writing relate to the content area and also felt that this was something that should be part of their role as literacy coach. However, there were inconsistencies about the other aspect of this standard. In terms of providing instruction to students, whether in a small group or individual setting, two coaches reported this was part of their job and should be, while the other two coaches reported that this was not part of their current role and should not be.

**Discussion**

Previous research has found little consistency in the roles and responsibilities of literacy coaches (IRA, 2004). In 2000, the International Reading Association acknowledged that literacy coaches assume multiple roles depending on the needs of students and teachers with whom they work. Middle school literacy coaches’ responsibilities are often as

varied as the myriad contexts in which they work. In fact, coaches, classroom teachers, and principals tend to have varying perceptions of the roles of responsibilities of the literacy coach (Mraz, Algozzine, & Watson, 2008; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001; Shaw, 2006). This study examined the roles and responsibilities of four middle school literacy coaches. While some uncertainty about the daily work of literacy coaches persisted, consistencies in terms of role expectations emerged, as the roles of three of the four study participants aligned with the recommended standards from the International Reading Association. Specifically, the importance of establishing rapport with teachers was one theme that consistently emerged from the data. Another common characteristic of the roles of the coaches in this study demonstrate that they all are involved with evaluating the literacy needs of students but to different extents.



As relatively new literacy coaches, the role itself was unclear. However, professional development offered to all coaches through a statewide initiative proved to be helpful. Three of the coaches discussed how the training was beneficial. They felt that they learned a lot and became stronger coaches as a result. One reported learning “new skills, websites, and information to share with teachers.” The state-level initiative also provided guidelines for the coach’s job description stating that 75% of coaches’ time should be spent working with teachers and students in classrooms. As suggested by one coach, this aligns with the IRA’s standards and prevents the coaches from being used

as substitute teachers for example.

All coaches in this study assumed several roles as they worked in a variety of settings that were also identified in the review of the literature. Based on survey results, all four literacy coaches reported the following roles as part of their responsibilities: act as an instructional leader in the area of literacy, provide professional development and resources to help teachers develop effective instruction, demonstrate lessons and provide ongoing support, provide one on one coaching by observing teachers in a nonthreatening manner and providing feedback, facilitate assessment processes, and have effective communication skills.

As suggested by the state guidelines, the coaches spend much of their time supporting teachers in the classroom. All four coaches describe the importance of modeling strategies and coaching teachers to become proficient on their own. One coach stated that she teaches sporadically and does more behind the scenes work such as data analysis because teachers do not request her assistance. The remaining coaches however describe getting to know teachers through coaching conversations where they ask questions to determine teachers' needs and adjust their support based on teachers' comfort levels and needs (Stover, Kissel, Haag, & Shoniker, 2011). These literacy coaches model effective literacy strategies until the teacher is ready to implement them effectively on their own. By spending time in classrooms modeling and providing support, the literacy coaches build trust with the teachers they support.

Overall, it is evident in the literature that, when literacy coaches have a thorough understanding of the diverse needs of adult learners, successful coaching techniques, knowledge of effective instructional practices, and clear roles and responsibilities, they have a greater potential to promote changes in classroom practice (IRA, 2004; Toll, 2005). Based on the data analysis in this study, building a rapport with teachers emerged as a central theme in contributing to an effective interaction between coach and teacher. IRA's Standard 1: Skillful Collaborators includes promoting positive relationships among school staff. All four literacy coaches reported this as part of their role and all believed it should be part of their role. By establishing and emphasizing positive relationships, the coaches were able to position themselves as a supportive figure in the building instead of an evaluative one. For example, one participant explained that, in order to build rapport with the teachers, this literacy coach made a concerted effort to assume a supportive instead of an evaluative role. An example of this can be seen when the coach describes how she spent more time modeling for some teachers before she released

them to implement the technique on their own and avoided observation before teachers felt comfortable with her presence in their classrooms. Her principal gave her feedback that indicated that the literacy coach was well received and that she positioned herself effectively as a supportive professional. Another coach established rapport by making it clear from the beginning that she was not the "know-all-expert" and that they will both learn together. She validated the positive techniques of teachers, particularly those who she is "not sure if they have bought into [her] yet." To emphasize the value of collaboration, this coach approached teachers by asking if they were interested in co-teaching and sharing their collective knowledge. One teacher remarked, "I'd love if you could come in once a week because there is always something that I learn from you." The literacy coach responded, "I always learn from [you] too." This demonstrated the coach's effort to build trusting, equal relationships with teachers. When literacy coaches worked together with teachers to build a learning community where teachers and coaches collaborated to establish goals and identify areas of needed professional development, coaches were able to better approximate the standards suggested by the International Reading Association for their role.

When trusting and mutually communicative relationships were established, coaches reported that teachers were less resistant. By positioning themselves as peers with teachers, the literacy coaches were able to show teachers that they were supportive and not evaluative authority figures.

Both similarities and differences are apparent in the coaches' roles as skillful evaluators of literacy needs (IRA Standard 3). All coaches reported that they were involved with the administration of assessments for students. Additionally, they participated in data analysis and progress monitoring of students as part of their roles as a literacy coach. One literacy coach stated, "most of the work I do is with data... our system is 100% driven on data." Another coach mentioned the use of a specific assessment to determine needs of students and differentiated instruction. However, survey results reveal that two out of the four literacy coaches did not engage in IRA's Standard 3 as part of their roles and responsibilities but believe it should be part of their jobs. Standard three states that coaches' roles should include leading faculty in understanding, selecting, and using multiple forms of assessment as diagnostic tools. Both similarities and differences in the work that each coach does at the school level reveal the need for more consistencies in roles and responsibilities for literacy coaches.

The interview data indicated that the role of the

literacy coach is complex. All four literacy coaches reported challenges and rewards of their positions. Their roles were dependent on the needs of individual teachers, directives from administration, mandated state requirements, and day-to-day challenges such as maneuvering between a variety of content area classes. One literacy coach described the challenge of the literacy coaching role as walking a fine line with administration and teachers and requires the need to remain neutral.

When literacy coaches have a solid understanding of and respect for the diverse needs of adult learners, they can promote changes in classroom practice (Bean, Belcastro, Hathaway, Risko, Rosemary, & Roskos, 2008; IRA, 2004; Stover, et al., 2011; Toll, 2005). By providing consistent and responsive professional development that is centered on enhancing the quality of instruction, literacy coaches have the potential to play an effective role as a member of the school's literacy team. Continued research in the area of literacy coaching is critical as we continue to refine the ways in which professional resources can be applied to improve teacher quality and enhance student achievement.

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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

#### Middle Literacy Coaches: A Study of Roles and Responsibilities

#### Establishing Rapport & Background Information

1. Tell me a little about yourself and your teaching experience.

2. What is your current title? Who are your roles and responsibilities? Who determines these?

3. Discuss your preparation for your job. What are your areas of certification/licensure? What in-service preparation and/or support have you received? Do you feel this is sufficient? Why/why not?

4. How many years have you been in your current position? What did you do before that? Why did you change?

#### Roles and Responsibilities

5. Do your roles and responsibilities differ from what you anticipated that they would be before you took the position? Explain.

6. With whom do you work primarily? (e.g. teachers, students, administrators). Why do you think it is this way?

7. When you work with teachers and students, what are some of your main responsibilities/activities? (e.g. direct teaching, co-teaching, planning, mentoring, evaluating, subbing, non-instructional duties)

8. Do you work with other specialist such as special education teachers, ESL teachers, speech therapists, etc? Please describe your work with them.

9. What do you normally do in the course of a week? Does this differ across the year or stay about the same? Why?

#### Rewards/Challenges

10. What do you find rewarding about your job?

11. What dilemmas do you face in your job? How do you solve these?

#### Conclusion

12. What else would you like to share about your position as a literacy professional?

#### Appendix B

##### Middle School Literacy Coach Survey

Adapted from *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches* (IRA, 2006) and *What's Hot, What's Not* (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009)

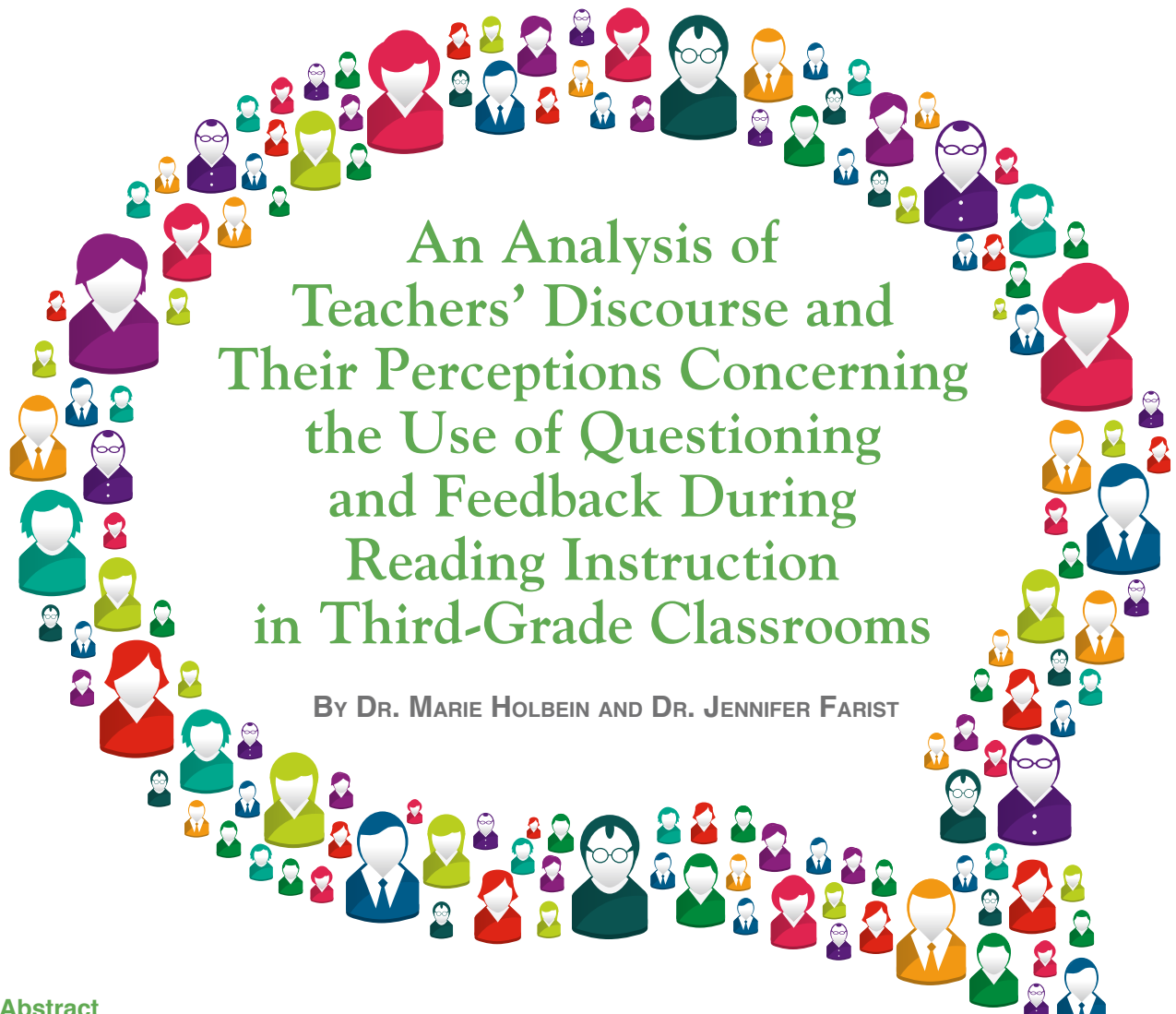
1 – Part of my current coaching role and should be

2 – Part of my current coaching role and should not be

3 – Not part of my current coaching role but should be

4 – Not part of my current coaching role and should not be

	Score (circle one)			
<b>Standard 1: Skillful Collaborators</b>				
<b>Collaborate with School Literacy Team</b> – collaborate with school level literacy team to determine school wide literacy strengths and needs and develop and to implement a literacy program	1	2	3	4
<b>Promote Positive Relationships Among School Staff</b> – establish and emphasize positive relationships in a supportive, rather than an evaluative manner.	1	2	3	4
<b>Foundations of Literacy</b> –share with teachers a body of research about how students become successful readers, writers, and communicators	1	2	3	4
<b>Family Literacy</b> – serve as a resource to families (e.g., provide information to parents about how they can support their child’s reading development at home)	1	2	3	4
<b>Standard 2: Skillful Job-Embedded Coaches</b>				
<b>Provide Professional Development</b> – share literacy strategies for effective reading and writing instruction	1	2	3	4
<b>Demo Lessons</b> –demonstrate instructional strategies and provide ongoing support to teachers as they try the strategies themselves	1	2	3	4
<b>Classroom Coaching (One-on-One)</b> – observe teachers in a nonthreatening manner in order to provide feedback through reflective dialogue	1	2	3	4
<b>Content Area Reading</b> – discuss/share strategies and ideas to enhance content area reading and writing	1	2	3	4
<b>Differentiated Instruction</b> –work with teachers to develop and implement differentiated instruction to meet the needs of individual learners	1	2	3	4
<b>Materials</b> – assist teachers in selection and analysis of content area text and instructional materials	1	2	3	4
<b>Standard 3: Skillful Evaluators of Literacy Needs</b>				
<b>Assessment</b> –lead faculty in understanding, selecting, and using multiple forms of assessments as diagnostic tools to guide instructional decision making and enhance both teacher and program effectiveness	1	2	3	4
<b>Analyze Data and Monitor Student Progress</b> – meet with teachers to examine student work and evaluate their success while analyzing trends and results	1	2	3	4
<b>Conduct Assessment</b> – for individuals or groups of students	1	2	3	4
<b>Standard 4: Skillful Instructional Strategists</b>				
<b>Content Area Knowledge</b> – know how reading and writing processes relate with the various disciplines (i.e. English language arts, math, science, and social studies)	1	2	3	4
<b>Provide Instruction</b> – for individuals or small groups of students who are struggling readers (push-in, pull-out, or both settings)	1	2	3	4



# An Analysis of Teachers' Discourse and Their Perceptions Concerning the Use of Questioning and Feedback During Reading Instruction in Third-Grade Classrooms

BY DR. MARIE HOLBEIN AND DR. JENNIFER FARIST

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher talk during elementary reading instruction. The study was designed to gain insight into existing discourse patterns and to understand how change in these patterns might be facilitated. The design of the study evolved after a review of existing literature on the topic of teacher talk indicated a lack of widespread, intentional focus on classroom discourse and its potential impact on student learning.

Qualitative methods were used to capture the language used by third-grade teachers during read aloud instruction. Data sources included audio recordings of lessons and teacher interviews. These methods were used to identify common communication patterns in the participating classrooms. After the initial analysis of discourse, the two most commonly used types of teacher talk, questioning and feedback, were investigated with more depth. The goal was to determine not only the types of questioning and feedback used by teachers but also the purpose of these two types of discourse.

Data were analyzed using a sociocultural lens based on the work of Vygotsky. The study was built upon theoretical and empirical evidence that effective teacher talk promotes student learning. The participating teachers were involved in data analysis as they reviewed transcripts of the read aloud instruction and responded to questions related to their use of discourse in the lessons. Results from the study highlight the need for an intentional focus on the discourse used by classroom teachers and provide insight into social and cultural factors that inhibit productive discourse.

**S**tudent learning is the primary purpose of schooling, and the teacher's role is to create an environment that maximizes student learning. A component of that critical learning environment is the verbal interaction, or discourse, that occurs within the social and cultural context of the classroom. The discourse facilitated by



the teacher, often referred to as teacher talk, is the focus of this investigation.

Vygotsky (1986) recognized the importance of social and cultural contexts to learning, and his theory of cognitive development, now known as sociocultural theory, emphasized the interdependence of social and individual processes. He recognized a number of internal developmental processes which operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment. One of these processes, internalization, occurs as social activities evolve into internal mental activities. The Russian psychologist used the example of problem solving in children to illustrate this developmental process. When children find themselves unable to solve a problem, they routinely turn to an adult and verbally describe the situation. As they develop, children replace socialized speech with egocentric speech as language becomes an intrapersonal function in addition to its interpersonal use. He believed that only when speech became internalized did it begin to organize the child's thought as an internal mental function.

Vygotsky (1978) used the term "meaning-making" to describe the process of linking new learning with what is already known. He theorized that meaning-making is dependent upon utterances. The purpose of these utterances is joint meaning-making as one makes meaning for oneself and extends one's own understanding while producing meaning for others. He concluded that the child develops into himself based on what he produces for others (Wells, 1999).

Vygotsky's theory (1978) provided a firm theoretical basis for learning and development that is of central importance to education. He agreed with controversial thinkers of his time period that individual developmental change was not simply biological but also rooted in society and culture. His work expanded on writings of his contemporary psychologists who were beginning to recognize the importance of the interaction of humans with their environment. He recognized the important distinction between animals and humans: animals react to their environment while humans have the capacity to alter the environment for their own purposes (Schunk, 2008).

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that the use of sign systems (language, writing, number systems) was unique to humans, evolved as a culture developed, and led to behavioral changes and cognitive development. Despite his interest in language as one of these sign systems, Vygotsky's writings lacked specific guidance on the types of language that would best facilitate the learning process in the classroom (Wells, 1999).

Despite this apparent gap between theory and practice, educators who support social learning theories believe that knowledge and practical application of Vygotsky's theory will allow teachers to maximize student learning. Vygotsky recognized the crucial role that expert members of the culture (such as parents or teachers) play in providing guidance and assistance to learners. However, he cautioned against too much guidance and assistance as the goal should be that children will become increasingly competent and autonomous participants in learning activities (Wells, 1999). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is based on the belief that 'good learning' occurs within a zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is just beyond what the child can do independently, or in advance of their development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Researchers in England developed a teaching approach called *Thinking Together*, with the goal of putting "a sociocultural theory of education into practice" (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 69). Their approach places a special emphasis on the teacher as a guide and model for language use. Teachers encourage students to give reasons, seek clarification, ask questions, and listen to each other's ideas. The results of a multiyear study indicate that the Thinking Together program had a positive impact on children's collective problem-solving as well as their individual reasoning capabilities. This provides evidence to support Vygotsky's (1978) theory that social interactions begin on an interpsychological plane and influence individual thinking or the intrapsychological plane. The researchers concluded that the quality of dialogue between teachers and learners and among learners has a potentially powerful impact on learning (Mercer & Littleton, 2007).

Numerous researchers have called attention to the value of talk and social learning within the classroom setting (Cazden, 2001; Skidmore, Perez-Parent, & Arnfield, 2003; Wells & Arauz, 2006). When evaluating characteristics of effective teachers, Flynn (2007) concluded that teacher behavior, teacher-subject knowledge, and teacher-pupil interaction had more to do with successes than nationally prescribed objectives. The author asserted that teacher-pupil interaction, which included high-quality questioning and conversations designed to meet the needs of the group and individuals, appeared to be a key feature of the success of teachers' lessons.

The question-answer relationship (QAR) strategy has been implemented during reading comprehension instruction to facilitate meaningful conversations about text (Raphael, 1982). It is a strategy designed to "provide a common way of thinking about and talking about sources of information for answering questions"

(Raphael, Highfield, & Au, 2006, p. 18). The language used with this strategy teaches students that answers can be found in the text or in background knowledge and experiences. By using the QAR strategy, students are taught to make decisions about where the answer to a question would be found. Questions that are in the book are labeled either Right There or Think and Search, while those which require students to use background knowledge to answer are called Author and Me or On my Own (Raphael, Highfield, & Au, 2006).

### Statement of Problem

Despite theoretical and empirical evidence which points to the potential impact of effective teacher talk on student learning, findings from research have not been translated into common teaching practice. Studies have determined that classroom discourse lacks evidence of effective strategies illuminated in research. Instead, researchers in two studies found similar results: classroom discourse is typically teacher centered, interactions follow traditional initiate-response-evaluate (IRE) patterns, and questions are recall based, or those which elicit a single, correct answer (Myhill, 2006; Skidmore, Perez-Parent, & Arnfield, 2003).

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine discourse, primarily in the form of teacher talk, as an instructional practice in elementary classrooms. The teacher talk that occurred during reading instruction in separate classrooms was examined generally and then more specifically. Closer examination focused on the types of questions asked by teachers during read aloud and the feedback that teachers gave to students' responses. Finally, the study gave teachers an opportunity to critically examine and reflect upon their existing discourse practices as they reviewed transcripts of their teacher talk.

Four research questions, related to questioning and feedback guided the study. The fourth research question from the larger study will be highlighted in this article. The question was: *To what extent do teachers' perceptions concerning the use of questioning and feedback during reading instruction align with actual practice?* This question was chosen because it combines data from each of the preceding research questions in order to compare teachers' perceptions concerning questioning and feedback with actual practice.

### Method

#### Participants

The three participating teachers are third grade teachers at a K-5 elementary school in rural north Georgia. The participants were selected based

on convenience. The school has a population of approximately 550 students. The school is classified as a Title 1 school based on a lower socioeconomic background of more than 50% of the students. The student population is mostly Caucasian, with about 15% of the students classified as Hispanic. At the time of this study, the school was in the final year of participation in the federally funded Reading First grant.

Each of the participating teachers was assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity throughout the study. The pseudonyms used for the study were Beth, Susie, and Ginger. Each of the participating teachers had teaching experience in other grade levels, but they were all new to the third grade for the 2009–2010 school year. These teachers were intentionally moved to third grade by the principal at the beginning of the school year, which suggests that she is confident in their teaching ability and competence because of the importance of success for students in third grade. Third grade is a year of high-stakes testing because third graders who do not pass the reading portion of the state-mandated test are not supposed to be promoted to fourth grade.

### Data Collection

Teacher interviews and audio recordings of instruction were the two data sources for this study. An interview was conducted with each teacher prior to audiotaping in each classroom. Teachers were asked general questions related to the use of questioning and feedback during read aloud. They were also asked to explain how teacher talk during read aloud affects student comprehension and what variables impact the effectiveness of teacher talk. Questions for this interview were based on the research questions for this study and were designed with the goal of identifying teachers' beliefs about these topics. The questions were somewhat predictive in nature as they allowed teachers to make statements about the topics before being recorded or reviewing any transcript data. Each interview was audiotaped for transcription and analysis.

### Questions Before Recording

- 1) How do you decide what kinds of questions to ask during a read aloud?
- 2) How do you decide what kinds of feedback to give to student responses during a read aloud?
- 3) How does your teacher talk during affect reading comprehension?
- 4) What are some factors that impact your teacher talk during read aloud?

Each of the participating teachers was audiotaped using a voice recorder during read aloud instruction.

For three consecutive weeks, each teacher was audiotaped once each week. The third-grade teachers were all required to do with their homeroom class daily. Homeroom classes were heterogeneously grouped, so during the read aloud time, each class contained students with a variety of reading abilities. Reading teachers chose a book to read aloud to students, often related to grade level science or social studies standards, and they prepared comprehension questions in advance to ask students before, during, and after the reading of text. The literacy coach provided reading teachers with guidelines to follow when developing comprehension questions. These guidelines included a list of comprehension strategies and a schedule for teaching specific strategies.

After the three weeks of audiotaping, transcripts were created from each read aloud session. Teachers were given a copy of the transcripts and allowed some time to read and reflect upon the content of the transcripts. The teachers were then interviewed using questions that were related specifically to the transcripts and based on the research questions. The questions for this interview focused on the actual use of questioning and feedback during the read aloud time. These interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis.

### Questions While Reviewing Each Transcript

- 1) How did your teacher talk affect student comprehension during the read aloud?
- 2) What was your purpose for questioning during the read aloud?
- 3) What types of questions did you use during the read aloud? (higher level/recall)
- 4) What was the purpose of the feedback you gave to students during the read aloud?

Two weeks later, the researcher interviewed each teacher again using culminating questions based on the research questions. Questions for this interview were created with the goal of allowing teachers to reflect on their actual practice. The questions were also designed to address differences between beliefs and practices that emerged when prior interview responses were compared to the read aloud transcripts. The qualitative nature of this research permitted the adjustment of the interview questions as the study progressed. The questions were refined slightly based on patterns and questions that emerged during data collection. These final interviews were also recorded for transcription and analysis.

### Final Questions

- 1) How do you decide what kinds of questions to ask during a read aloud?
- 2) Do you normally have a “correct answer” in mind when you ask a question?

- 3) How do you decide what kinds of feedback to give to student responses during a read aloud?
- 4) How does your teacher talk during read aloud affect reading comprehension?
- 5) What are some factors that impact your teacher talk during read aloud?
- 6) Are you generally satisfied with your teacher talk during read aloud? If not, what would you change if no limiting factors existed?

To compare teachers’ perceptions regarding teacher talk during read aloud instruction with actual practice, frequency tables that were created after coding of transcripts were compared to interview data. Teachers were asked during each of the three interviews to reflect upon their existing and future practices as they identified areas for improvement. Though this study was not designed to facilitate change among the participating teachers, this type of reflection upon effectiveness is critical to improved teaching behaviors (Topping & Ferguson, 2005). Allowing teachers to compare their thoughts about the subject of teacher talk with their actual practice promotes awareness of effective and less than effective teaching practices.

### Results and Analysis

The research question which guided the study was as follows: *To what extent do teachers’ perceptions concerning the use of questioning and feedback during reading instruction align with actual practice?* To answer this question, transcript data was compared to teachers’ interview responses.

### Analysis of Teacher Questioning

Transcript data revealed that assessment was the most commonly used purpose for questioning. An example of this frequent pattern of questioning occurred when Susie was introducing a book about Eleanor Roosevelt to her students. She used questions and feedback to determine if students could name text features which are often found in nonfiction text. This was an assessment of prior learning:

Susie: What kind of things might we see in a nonfiction book?

Student: The headings.

Susie: Headings, good, what else?

Student: Captions.

Susie: Captions, good, what else?

Student: Subheadings.

Susie: Subheadings.

Student: Graphs.

Susie: Yes, graphs.

*(Students continue naming text features.)*

Susie: Yes, all those things that we've talked about all year in nonfiction we might find in this book about Eleanor Roosevelt, okay?

The frequency of assessment-type questions in the transcripts supports what the teachers said in interviews about knowing correct answers in advance and guiding students toward those correct answers. The teachers planned questions that typically had a single correct answer and they frequently assessed the students to be sure that they also knew the correct answer. This practice led to a predictable, teacher-dominated communication pattern which was especially noticeable when listening to the recorded. The teachers in this study did not seem willing to sacrifice control of conversations; they had an apparent recognition that they wouldn't always know where the conversation might lead if controlled by students.

In another study, teacher and researchers who were intentionally attempting to infuse more student initiated dialogue into reading instruction described how they wrestled with decisions about when to enter conversations to explicitly teach reading strategies or interject accepted interpretations of text (Aukerman, Belfatti, & Santori, 2008). They worried not only about what would be said but also about what would be learned. This struggle was based, in part, on the recognition that in an educational system driven by assessment and accountability, students will at some point be expected to know the one correct answer and that answer may or may not emerge during a student-led discussion.

Further analysis of the teachers' perceptions about the purpose of questioning compared with actual practice suggests that teachers may be unaware of their multiple purposes for questioning. Each of the teachers described her purpose for questioning very specifically: to teach students the QAR strategy. As predicted, the transcripts did contain multiple references to the QAR strategy. Students in all three classes were regularly asked which strategy ("right there," "think and search," "author and me," or "on my own") would help them find the answer and then they were asked to explain why they chose that answer. However, the data suggests that the primary purpose of questioning for all teachers was assessment. This included assessing student knowledge of the QAR strategy but also the assessment of content knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension of text, and text features. An example of this pattern of assessment from Ginger's transcript:

Ginger: There's that vocabulary word-diligence, what does that mean?

Student: Working hard.

Ginger: Yes, what was the time called?

Student: The Great Depression.

Ginger: Good, the great depression (reading from text) Okay, we talked about that word, migrant workers, it means people who move from place to place in search of work, there's a picture there of a young migrant child and they work just as hard and often times for as many hours as the adults do and we read that Cesar even a lot of times didn't attend school, he went to work to earn money for his family. And if you'll look at the picture here the caption shows us a family picking grapes in California. Okay, I want you to turn around and get with your group to discuss what were some of the working conditions for these migrant farm workers?

Students: (Discussing with group)

Teacher: Ok, what type of question? Are you having to use the book at all or is it completely in your head? I see three groups holding up think and search, that is correct, you had to use the book because the book, the author, gave us clues about what the migrant workers were dealing with. Now, was the answer in just one sentence or on just one page?

Student: No

Teacher: No, and that is why it is a think and search question.

Another inconsistency related to the use of questions during was noted when the transcript data and interview data were compared based on the nature of questioning by teachers. Each of the teachers described her questioning as somewhat balanced. Beth noted, "One read aloud which was fictional had more recall-type questions, but there was a good mix of recall and higher level questions on the other two read aloud lessons which were based on nonfiction text." Susie stated that she "tried to incorporate all types of questions, especially higher-order thinking questions," and she also described the types of questions that she used as "recall questions in which students had to think and search for the answers and inferential questions." Ginger also felt like she "had a good mix of questions, with QAR, the 'right there' and 'think and search' are more recall where 'author and me' and 'on my own' are generally higher level." The teachers recognized that effective questioning is balanced (Cruickshank, Bainer, & Metcalf, 1999; Topping & Ferguson, 2005). Despite this recognition, the majority of questions used by all teachers would be considered lower level based on the Cognitive Process Dimension (Anderson, et al, 2001, p. 67-68). Most of the time, students were asked questions which required them to remember or understand, which are considered the lowest two levels of the cognitive model based on the cognitive processes required to answer those types

of questions. An analysis of the transcripts revealed that Beth most often used remembering questions that required students to recall or repeat facts from text or previous instruction. This type of question was used when she was reviewing vocabulary words: “Okay, what’s knowledge?” or “What does text mean?” These questions required students to recall definitions they had previously learned, so they would be considered lower level based on the cognitive process involved in answering. These questions promote retention of facts but not transfer of knowledge.

On the other hand, Susie and Ginger used more understanding questions which required students to classify or explain answers. These questions were often used when students were asked to explain the type of question (based on QAR strategy), such as when Susie asked, “Why was this a ‘think and search’ [question]?” The teachers used a limited amount of applying and analyzing questions during the. Ginger asked her students to analyze a character’s feelings when she said, “How do you think he is feeling now, and how have his feelings changed?” This question is considered higher level and an example of a question that promotes meaningful learning. Susie was the only teacher who used a question that required students to evaluate when they were giving their opinion about text.

### Analysis of Teacher Feedback

When asked about their purpose for giving feedback to student responses the teachers indicated that they normally used feedback to guide students to the correct answer. In fact, based on the feedback given by teachers in the transcripts, this was often unnecessary because students had already given a correct answer. This is apparent because teachers responded with acknowledging and accepting efforts or praising and accepting efforts about 75% of the time. These types of responses indicate that the students gave a correct answer. In contrast, teachers clarified or corrected and encouraged much less often, about 25% of the time, which indicates that students gave incorrect, incomplete, or hesitant responses far less frequently.

The limited amount of correction and encouragement would suggest that students spent little time working in what Vygotsky (1978) called their zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky, to promote cognitive development, students should be performing tasks, with the help of a teacher, which they could not perform independently because of the difficulty level (Schunk, 2008). In this study, teachers seem to be performing tasks with or for students that the students could perform independently without teacher assistance. Even the students seem to recognize that they need more independent practice with text. An example of this is found in Beth’s transcript:

Beth: What are some text features that we might see in a nonfiction book?

Beth: Okay, let’s open up the book and do a picture walk. First of all, on the first page we do have a table of contents. How many chapters do we have in this book?

Student: five

Beth: Where could we go in this book if we don’t remember what a word means?

Student: glossary

Beth: Okay, do we have a glossary?

Student: Yes

Beth: (continues reviewing text features...maps, photographs, etc.)

Student: Are we going to read?

Beth: Yes, we’re going to read

Student: Can we read by ourselves?

Beth: We will start reading (teacher reads from text)

This dialogue illustrates the lack of challenge for students as they are not required to think about answers to questions. As Vygotsky explained it, “the only good learning” is that which is in advance of development (1978, p. 89).

Teachers in this study used vague terms to describe the types of feedback they used. They described their feedback as “encouraging” or “not negative.” However, an analysis of the kinds of feedback used determined that the majority of feedback was evaluative in nature. Teachers used feedback to evaluate student responses, and they maintained strict control of the conversation, usually following the IRE pattern of communication. This common pattern consisted of the teacher initiating a conversation (often with a question), the student responding, and the teacher evaluating the student’s response. Here are samples of this frequent discourse pattern:

Beth: By looking at this book, who can tell me—is it going to be fiction or nonfiction? (Initiate)

Student: Nonfiction (Respond)

Beth: Nonfiction is correct, how do you know—look at the clues on the front of the book. (Evaluate/Initiate)

Student: A photo. (Respond)

Beth: A photo, exactly, it has real pictures. (Evaluate)

Susie: Okay, Emily, What did Eleanor do to help Franklin win the presidency? Tell me the type of question that is. (Initiate)

Student: Think and search (Respond)

Susie: Good, it's a think and search, now let's answer that, what did she do? (Evaluate/Initiate)

Student: She walked through the crowds and then that showed respect from her. (Respond)

Susie: Okay, she roamed through the crowds to talk to people because he couldn't. (Evaluate)

This pattern is consistent with what Mehan called the "teacher's agenda" (1978). It is a stance adopted by teachers for the purpose of achieving educational objectives while maintaining social control (Mehan, 1979). Throughout this study, teachers fulfilled their responsibility of evaluating the performance of students. Teachers in this study seemed to be aware of the time involved in mastering all of the standards and their obligation to evaluate student performance and then "move on" to new concepts.

The alignment between perceptions and actual practice was also explored during the interviews. These interviews allowed teachers to explain the social and cultural context which encompassed the verbal interactions. During the interview conducted while teachers reviewed transcripts and in the final interview, teachers were asked what changes (if any) they would make in the teacher talk that might improve comprehension. Teachers were also asked what factors might prevent those changes from being made.

Beth felt like she "should have given the students more opportunities to respond to what they had heard." She said, "I should have used more open-ended questions related to why they chose a specific QAR strategy." She noticed what was evident in the transcripts; she had used 106 assessment type questions and only 18 open-ended questions. Beth added that being "assigned a specific comprehension strategy... we must focus on that strategy" limited her ability to change her teacher talk.

Susie mentioned that she would like to be able to ask questions that "involved multiple strategies" when practicing reading comprehension. She agreed with Beth that being required to "stick to a certain comprehension strategy limits the type of questioning a teacher can do." Though the participating school discourages multiple strategy reading comprehension instruction, a well-known national reading document published by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development states that multiple strategy instruction seems to be the most effective way to teach cognitive strategies (2000). In addition, the report concluded that teaching a variety of strategies can result in increased learning, increased memory and understanding of new text material, and better reading comprehension.

Susie also noted that time was a limiting factor in improving reading comprehension. She "was surprised at how often I mentioned that we were in a hurry, I believe that might have hindered comprehension." Susie recognized an example of this hurried discussion in her transcript. She posed a genuine information question before reading that was intended to build background knowledge as students shared experiences from their own lives. Susie asked the question and allowed students to discuss their answers with their peers, but when it came time to share their thoughts with the whole group, the discussion was cut short by the teacher.

Susie: Okay, listen for this question. Have you ever been somewhere and been homesick and wished you were at home? Talk to your partners about what kind of question that is, and then answer that question with your group.

*(Students talking in groups)*

Susie: Okay, guys, my turn. Emily, what kind of question is that?

Student: On my own.

Susie: Okay, why is it 'on my own'?

Student: Because it's not about the book.

Susie: Excellent. I'm not asking you about the book. It's not really about the book although this person is in the same predicament. I'm asking about you.

Susie: Cody, tell me about a time, real quick.

Student: Well, my maw-maw and paw-paw were taking me and my sister to this Christmas party, and I wanted to be at home with my parents.

Susie: Okay, you missed your parents; homesick is a bad feeling. Okay, hands down. We don't have time for everybody's story.

When asked about changes that she would like to make, Ginger expressed a desire to do more "hands-on and technology activities as follow-ups to my (especially for science and social studies themes)." This statement suggested that Ginger has a desire to create a more social, less teacher-directed climate during the read aloud time. She also believed that time was a limiting factor and "guidelines and expectations [as a result] of the Reading First grant" inhibited changes.

Each of the teachers mentioned challenges to effective teacher talk related to the school culture. It seemed that teachers control interactions in the classroom setting while administrators and the literacy coach exhibit control over instructional strategies (such as questioning and feedback) used by teachers. It is evident from teachers' responses that the culture of

the school influences student learning.

Teachers were also asked during the culminating interview about their “general level of satisfaction” with the teacher talk used during read aloud. This question was added to the final interview after the transcripts were created because the researcher wanted to determine if teachers were satisfied with the lessons after reviewing the transcripts or if they had specific changes in mind when they had a chance to review the lessons. Despite statements by each of the teachers which indicated a sense of resistance to “being told what to do” during, each of the participating teachers expressed an overall satisfaction with the read aloud lessons.

Though Susie expressed an overall satisfaction with the teacher talk used during her , she did mention two possible changes that she felt could improve her lessons. She was concerned that she “rushed the students...I was surprised at how often I would say ‘Okay, quickly’ or ‘I need an answer right now.’” Another area of concern was the focus on a single comprehension strategy. She said, “It would be wonderful to be able to plan a read aloud and then ask whatever we thought was appropriate for the particular book. I would like to be able to do that.”

When Ginger was asked the same question about her level of satisfaction and the changes that could improve her lessons, she also described herself as “overall pretty satisfied with it.” She did point out that she felt “somewhat scripted...with [questions] prepared [in advance for ].” However, she admitted that she doesn’t “always stick to that.” She explained further:

I do if I think about a question when I’m reading; I do ask it or talk about it. If a student asks me something in the middle of reading I try not to ignore that even though that’s not something I originally planned to talk about.

### Implications for Action

This investigation of teacher talk was designed to gain greater insight into existing discourse patterns and to attempt to understand how change in these patterns can be facilitated. The focus of this study was the discourse used by classroom teachers. However, the results of the investigation identified another potential influence on teacher talk in classrooms: those outside the classroom such as administrators, professional development providers, and policy makers. More productive discourse will be the result of changes facilitated by both of these groups.

### Implications for Classroom Teachers

Teacher talk is a potentially powerful instructional tool.

To take advantage of this instructional tool, teachers must become aware of their current practices, intentionally use questions and feedback for multiple purposes, and strive to move students more quickly to a level of independent learning by actively involving them during instruction.

Though participation in this study was somewhat inconvenient for busy classroom teachers, they seemed to appreciate the opportunity to review the transcripts from their recorded instruction. Each teacher recognized areas for potential improvement. These areas of improvement would not have been uncovered without participation in this study. To disrupt comfortable habits, classroom discourse must become a deliberate object of study (Cullican, 2007). Recent studies have concluded that opportunities to analyze and reflect upon classroom discourse can lead to greater understanding by teachers of the impact discourse has on student learning (Reznitskaya, 2012; Thwaite & Rivalland, 2009).

Questioning of students should continue to be a common strategy used during reading comprehension instruction. Teacher’s questioning as an ongoing evaluation tool fulfills a major part of the teacher’s responsibility in the classroom. However, adjustments to the types and purposes of questions are necessary to maximize student learning. The results of this study highlight a noticeable lack of balance in the types and purposes of questioning used by teachers. Feedback should also be used for multiple purposes, such as building upon student responses or inquiring further, not simply to evaluate student responses. According to Vygotsky, every function in the child’s development occurs twice; first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level (1978). Guided practice using questions and feedback which invoke higher order thinking skills will allow a child to develop cognitive processes first, between people (interpsychological) and then apply those processes as an independent task inside the child (intrapsychological). Changes in the types of statewide end of year assessments support this needed shift in focus toward more cognitively challenging tasks for students. According to the National PTA, states (including Georgia) are moving towards assessments in which “students will be asked not only what the answer is to a question, but why-i.e. how they know or what evidence supports their answer.” (National PTA, 2013)

Teachers need to move students more quickly to the independent stage during reading comprehension instruction. This need became apparent during the analysis of explicit language used during instruction involving the QAR strategy. Teachers focused, for at least three weeks, on teaching, modeling, and

practicing a strategy that students had been using for over a year. Although the authors of this strategy endorse a “gradual release of responsibility” when using the strategy (Raphael, Highfield, & Au, 2006, p. 37), the teachers appeared to be reluctant to move toward more independent practice for students. This independent practice seemed appropriate and necessary based on the level of student success indicated by the teachers’ frequent use of affirming and praising feedback during the strategy instruction. Vygotsky (1978) recognized that children are capable of doing much more in “collective activity or under the guidance of adults” (p. 88) and warned that “learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective” (p. 89).

### **Implications for Administrators, Professional Development Providers, and Policy Makers**

Some of the necessary changes to teacher talk are beyond the control of classroom teachers. Those who make decisions about time allocated for planning and instruction and those who develop timelines and curriculum maps must allow and support an intentional focus on teacher talk as a powerful instructional tool. Teachers need to be given time to focus on improving instructional practices related to teacher talk, and they must have professional development opportunities that link the latest strategy for reading instruction to educational theory. In addition, outside observers must recognize the benefits of social learning in classrooms.

The results of this investigation of teacher talk indicate a need for teachers to have time to record themselves and then reflect on their practice. A researcher who has studied classroom discourse around the world concluded that regular monitoring of classroom discourse and self-evaluation as part of in-service training was necessary for teachers (Wells & Arauz, 2006). Teachers also need to be given opportunities to reflect on their beliefs about teaching practice. This is the key to connecting theory and practice (Hardman, 2008).

References to educational theory as the basis for teaching practices were noticeably absent from teachers’ interview responses. Professional development providers need to recognize that teacher training for new strategies, such as QAR, needs to be more detailed. This includes any learning theory the strategy is based upon. Teachers in this study appeared to be implementing strategies that they were not well informed about. Without a thorough explanation of the strategy, teachers may not be implementing it properly. If teachers are unfamiliar with why a specific strategy is beneficial, they may become resistant to implementation. This could explain teachers’ statements regarding the timetable

for teaching specific comprehension strategies at the participating school. Teachers explained unenthusiastically, “Basically, we just do what we’re told to do.” They reiterated, “A comprehension strategy is chosen for us and we must focus on that strategy.”

Those who influence classrooms from the outside must recognize and discourage questioning and feedback practices which promote short-term memorization rather than meaningful learning. In addition, those who are observing classrooms need to look for and encourage a greater balance between teacher and student directed activity during reading instruction. Vygotsky’s theory (1986) described the progression to reflection and logical reasoning at the intramental level as a result of discussion, interaction, and arguments at the intermental level. The apparent absence of social interaction at the intermental level could be affecting learning at the intramental level. Vygotsky described social interactions as the foundation of learning, “social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships” (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163). Those who influence classrooms from the outside need to encourage social interaction during reading instruction; this can strengthen the foundation for meaningful learning.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This investigation of teacher talk revealed discourse patterns which are consistent with those commonly described throughout educational research on the topic. The researchers in this study identified a gap in existing research, a frequent absence of the teacher’s voice in studies of classroom discourse. For that reason, the teacher’s voice was intentionally included in this study. Further exploration into external influences on the discourse used by classroom teachers is necessary to gain greater insight into the problem of ineffective discourse practices and possible solutions.

To maximize student learning, the discourse that occurs within the social and cultural context of the classroom must be targeted for examination and improvement. This type of improvement is not simple. It requires teachers to “partially relinquish control of the flow of discussion, give up the habit of evaluating each student contribution, and allow students to initiate when they have something that they consider relevant to contribute [to conversations]” (Wells, 2007, p. 264). Despite the challenges, improved classroom discourse is possible when the topic becomes an intentional focus of instructional practice and teachers take advantage of the social aspects of learning.

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# Reading, Motivation, and the Power of Social Relationships: Learning from Middle School Students in a Title I Reading Classroom

BY TREVOR THOMAS STEWART, PH.D.  
AND EMILY PENDERGRASS, PH.D.

## Abstract

Adolescent students' social relationships have myriad influences on their lives. Therefore, it is important to ascertain how students' social relationships can inform teachers' efforts to create authentic learning experiences and increase student motivation to develop life-long reading habits. This paper examines middle school students' perceptions of reading and the connections between social relationships and reading. Drawing on a series of semi-structured interviews with eighth grades students, this paper discusses the role of social relationships in students' motivation to read. The authors explore the students' perceptions and some share some insight into how social relationships might increase students' motivation to read.

**Author 2:** What do you think most teenagers think about reading?

**Nicole:** (pause) I don't know—there are just so many people who love to read. And there are so many people who don't like to read.

**Author 2:** So think about the kids who love to read. How do they explain their opinion of loving to read?

**Nicole:** Um, they like usually don't talk about it or really, care about what other people think.

**Author 2:** So do these people that love to read talk about reading at all?

**Nicole:** Yes they do. I have some friends like, Lindsay, Nora, Julie, Santana, who love to read a lot of books. And like usually after the CRCT [Criterion Referenced Competency Test] and stuff we were like the only thing we talked about was the books that we were reading. It was pretty fun.

**Author 2:** What did the people around you think of when they watched you talking about reading?

**Nicole:** That we're bookworms and we're weird. (Laughs)

**Author 2:** (laughs) why would they think you are weird?

**Nicole:** (laughs) because they don't like to read. But that's what makes them weird.

**Author 2:** Uh, how does what you see other people reading influence what you read?

**Nicole:** If I see one of my friends who has a good book, I'll pick the book up and say "Hey, what's this book about?" And they will tell me what they've read so far. And I'll say, "When you're finished I would like to try it out."

Nicole (all names are pseudonyms) has recently become an enthusiastic reader. We believe that a significant part of her newfound enthusiasm for reading may be related to some of her friends' positive perceptions of reading and the excitement that is generated by an enthusiastic recommendation for a book. Nicole's experience is similar to one that so many of us have had so many times in the past: Excitedly waiting for a friend to finish a book, so we can borrow it—or not being able to wait and impulsively downloading a friend's recommendation to an eReader. Talking with Nicole encouraged us to explore the connections between social relationships and the reading habits of adolescent students who have been labeled struggling readers (because of their standardized tests scores) and placed in an eighth grade Title I reading class. This paper describes our work with eight students in a Title I reading class at Harmony Middle School (pseudonym) in Georgia.

### Our Stance

We approached this inquiry and analysis from a social constructionist model (Charmaz, 2006), where learning is a dynamic interchange between students and teachers. Our intent was to examine the ideals constructed by adolescents in a Georgia middle school to learn about their perceptions of themselves as readers. We believe that language and its usage are inherently social. This belief is grounded in the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), who argued that words are given their meaning by the “social atmosphere of the world” (p. 276). The words teachers and students use in classrooms every day are deeply influenced by social contexts (Bakhtin). As people communicate with one another, the words they choose are colored by the contexts that surround them. For example, a student from the mountains of north Georgia is likely to conjure images of Jack's River Falls when he or she hears the word river. In contrast, a student from Savannah is likely to image a slowly moving tidal river when asked to imagine a river scene. The influences of context and experience extend far beyond the level of individual words. A student who grew up walking the banks of Jack's River hunting with her grandfather may be much more likely to be interested in reading a book like *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1974) than a student who grew up in urban Atlanta and has little to no experience hunting and fishing. There is little doubt that a skilled teacher can find ways to engage both of these imagined students in this text. However, careful attention to students' cultural contexts, specifically their social relationships, can make it easier for teachers to position reading as a social experience. As Ivey (1999) argued, students are significantly more motivated when reading tasks are connected to learning things that are important to them.

Exploring what motivates students to develop a love of learning and reading is not a new research topic in literacy studies (Guthrie et al., 1996; Klauda & Guthrie, 2014; Strommen & Mates, 2004). It is, however, a topic that teachers and researchers must continue to explore as cultural contexts shift, technology advances, and curricular demands place increasing importance upon students' abilities to read independently. Logan, Medford, and Smith's (2011) study of the connections between intrinsic motivation and reading comprehension highlighted the importance of understanding the role of motivation in students' abilities, particularly the abilities of struggling readers, to read proficiently and succeed on standardized reading comprehension tests. Clearly, the goal of reading instruction is to prepare students for more than success on high stakes tests, but the influences of these tests on classroom instruction and culture cannot be ignored.

As high stakes tests and standardized curricula continue to dominate instruction, too many middle and secondary English classrooms have become places where, for many students, reading is simply a formulaic endeavor akin to completing a scavenger hunt (Applebee, 1996; Author 1, 2012; Fecho & Botzakis, 2007). Standardized instruction that ignores intrinsic motivation and individual difference does little to engage students and motivate them to learn for personal reasons (Author 1, 2010). This does not have to be the case.

We argue that it is possible to engage students in effective, authentic instruction in the Language Arts classroom, which can still meet the ever-increasing demands of policy initiatives aimed at producing college and career-ready students like the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS). The CCGPS Text Complexity Rubric (Georgia Department of Education, 2011) includes a focus on matching students and texts. As teachers navigate the complicated task of evaluating each aspect of text complexity (qualitative, quantitative, and read/task match), it can be helpful for to have specific areas of focus to consider. Students' social relationships can be an excellent focus area in this process. Our study was designed to explore the perceptions of reading held by middle school students who fit the “struggling reader” category, and develop insight into their experiences related to the influences of social relationships on reading and motivation in order to make recommendations for improving classroom instruction.

### Context

Harmony Middle School (pseudonym) is situated in a small town that is rapidly changing into an upscale

Georgia metropolitan suburb. In the last ten years, the school has seen drastic changes in demographics—shifting from a rural school with students from farming backgrounds to a semi-suburban school with an influx of upper middle class students moving into newly-built million dollar homes. The student population at Harmony Middle has become more diverse in recent years and the number of students receiving free or reduced lunch has declined.

### Participants

We recruited participants from Author 2's Eighth Grade Title I reading class. After hearing a brief description of the project, eight students elected to participate (with parental permission). The research project consisted of a series of three semi-structured interviews. For this project, we engaged in what Maxwell (2005) calls "purposeful selection" (p. 89). First, we chose to recruit students from this class because their membership in this "remedial" reading class has given them the label "struggling readers" based on their academic histories and teacher recommendations. Second, the students in this class represented an interesting cross-section of the school population. There were both male and female students from varying social groups that represent a cross-section of the student population in the class. All participants are native English speakers, and they each have a school history of struggling with reading.

### Data Generation, and Analytic Approach

We utilized semi-structured interviews, which created opportunities for both the researchers and the participants to "jointly construct narrative and meaning" (Riessman, 2008, p. 23). Since we engaged in dialogue with the participants, we must recognize that we are "an active presence in the text" that comprises the interview situation (Riessman, p.105). Therefore, we argue that the interview process is "unavoidably collaborative" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 4). In our view, interviewing is a process that is influenced by the mutual shaping that occurs as knowledge is socially constructed through dialogue. Each of the interview sessions we conducted relied on open-ended questions designed to draw the students into dialogue about their perceptions of reading, their perceptions of themselves as readers, and their social relationships.

We conducted our interviews with the goal of being attentive to each participant's interpretations and experiences. Therefore, our approach to data analysis was largely concerned with identifying themes that illustrated the participants' experiences and perceptions. In order to remain consistent with our social constructionist theoretical framework, we have chosen to situate our data analysis methods

within Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory and elements of phenomenological analysis (Laverty, 2003), specifically Kvale's (1996) meaning interpretation.

Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory provides a means of reducing data into manageable chunks. By reducing our data into chunks, we have been able to focus on tacit themes and issues in the data. Through the use of memos and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006), we interrogated the interrelationships between those explicit and implicit themes and issues. For example, as Author 1 was transcribing his first interview with Barney, he identified "topics of interest/ choice" as a possible category that might be significant. Through the process of writing memos related to this interview, Author 1 was able to identify a category that had the potential to be weak. As Charmaz notes, "theoretical sampling [aided by memo writing] prompts you to predict [emphasis in original] where and how you can find needed data to fill gaps and to saturate categories" (p. 103). By sharing memos with each other during the data collection and initial analysis phases of the project, we were able to ensure that we asked questions in subsequent interviews with each of the participants that would help us explore the relationships between the categories. The follow-up questions we asked during later interviews with each participant allowed us to elicit more robust data. Additionally, we read and reread the interview transcripts from each of the eight participants carefully to ensure that the themes and categories that we identified were present in the data generated through our conversations with all eight participants.

Blending Charmaz's (2006) approach of data reduction with Kvale's (1996) method of meaning interpretation allowed the data to be considered in multiple contexts. The themes and categories we identified during the coding process allowed us to dialogue with the implicit meanings we identified in the data that might have gone unnoticed. However, we needed a data analysis method that would allow us to ensure that we did not decontextualize the data by limiting our analysis of the data to a dialogue between themes and categories. Bakhtin (1981) reminds us "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions" (p. 293). Meaning interpretation provided us with a method for ensuring that we attended to each of those contexts that influenced the meanings we constructed in the data.

We believe that the data we have selected to present in this article accurately represent the themes we generated in our analysis of the interviews with all eight students who participated in the study. In order

to provide the richest possible descriptions of the participants' and their perceptions and experiences in this article, we have chosen to present the data from four participants: Barney, Big Ron, Felicia, and Nicole. In an effort to ensure that these students can be seen as unique individuals, instead of simply data points, we have constructed portraits of each of them using what we learned about them from the profiles they completed during the consent process, the ways they self-identified during the interviews, and the time we spent with them during the course of the school year in Author 2's classroom.

**Barney.** Barney is a 14-year-old athlete. He stays busy playing football, basketball, and baseball. He attends church every Sunday. One of his favorite things to do is to be outside playing whether in the woods with a .22 rifle or in the creeks with a four-wheeler.

**Big Ron.** Big Ron is a 15-year-old gamer. He enjoys playing all kinds of computer games with his older brother and his friends. He is repeating the eighth grade and in contrast to Barney's plaid shirts and jeans, Big Ron prefers to wear baggy, black jeans and spiky collars and bracelets.

**Felicia.** Felicia is a 14-year-old "country girl". She would rather be outside doing anything than inside. She loves to squirrel hunt. She and her mom live with their extended family, as there are many cousins that love to spend time together.

**Nicole.** Nicole is a 14-year-old "drama queen". She is oftentimes wrapped up in the middle school drama of an adolescent girl's life. She loves to read books that are full of excitement around dating, difficult choices, and gossip.

We have chosen to highlight these four students as they come from different social groups and each talk very specifically about how their social relationships affect their reading practices. While the data is consistent across all participants these four students are the most vocal about their social relationships and reading practices.

## Discussion

Adolescence is the time in a child's life when peer groups become one of the most significant elements in the construction of self-concept (Allen et al., 2005; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002; Wentzel, 1998). Franzak (2006) positioned reading as a socially situated activity instead of "a stand-alone practice" that occurs in isolation (p. 221). This idea dovetails nicely with Wentzel's (1997) work, which found "significant relations" between students' academic efforts and their social relationships with peers and teachers; students

with friends and caring teachers tend to perform better in school.

## The Role of Social Relationships

Our work with Nicole and her classmates represents an effort to learn more about individual students' perceptions of reading and experiences related to the influences of social relationships on reading and motivation. Our intent is to contribute to the development of authentic models of learning, which may increase opportunities for the development of curricula based on knowledge-in-action instead of knowledge-out-of-context (Applebee, 1996). Essentially, we believe it is important to consider how students' social contexts can inform the choices teachers make as they strive to foster a love of reading and learning in the English classroom.

Our discussions with the participants demonstrated that social relationships can have both positive and negative influences on the reading habits of students who have been labeled struggling readers. If students engage in discussions of their interests, or participate in activities that involve their interests such as baseball game conversations, they are part of what Gee (2002) labeled an "affinity group" (p. 105). To be a part of an affinity group, one must share an "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices" (p. 105). Many of these group discussions occur outside of classrooms, where students can observe, argue, and contribute in ways that are often not allowed in school. When teachers attend to students' social relationships—or membership in affinity groups—they can find ways to bring those relationships into dialogue with the curriculum by creating opportunities for discussion within these groups. These discussions can be face-to-face or virtual with social media facilitating them and contributing to the building of affinity groups. Instagram, for example, can be a useful tool to facilitate connections between students' interests, social relationships, and skills included in the CCGPS. Teachers can create assignments where students might create profiles related to characters and use Instagram to tag photos and create "a following" among the members of an affinity group. For a recent example of teacher at Pearl Cohn High School in Georgia who has integrated the practice of tapping into an online, affinity group related to John Green's (2012) novel *The Fault in our Stars*, explore the hashtag "#firebirdsfeelalive" on Instagram. Felicia and Nicole both shared a keen interest in Stephanie Meyer's (2005) novel *Twilight*. Author 2 could have capitalized on this affinity group in her class to craft activities like this and help these students connect their interest in *Twilight* with curricular goals related to characterization. Throughout the interviews, these students routinely discussed the power their friends

had in terms of piquing their interests in texts.

Barney, a participant who is, by his own admission, disinterested in most types of reading, stated, “If they’re [his friends] reading a book and it’s something I’m interested in. Then, I want to read it. If they say it was a good book.” Barney’s friends can motivate him to read if the topic is of interest to him. Bakhtin (1981) argued that each word lives “on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context (p. 284). This concept can be connected with the boundaries between students’ social groups, individual interests, and the tasks required of students in schools. Barney, who does not self-identify as a reader, was influenced by friends whose interest in reading certain texts helped him see that he could, indeed, find things to identify with and engage in within a text. Teachers can draw upon the knowledge they gain about students’ affinity groups to increase students’ motivation to read and help them generate positive perceptions of reading.

Big Ron also discussed the influence of social relationships on his perceptions of reading and his reading habits. When asked if his friends influenced his reading habits, he said, “sometimes. I just. They read way better than me an’ I just want to get up to their level.” For Big Ron, his peer group represented a positive image of reading—a reason to actually struggle, do the work, and improve his reading ability. Again, we can see a student looking across a boundary and finding a bridge to that alien context. Big Ron and Barney helped us see Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of heteroglossia at work in their views of reading. As they engage in dialogue with their classmates, their words are always surrounded by a social atmosphere, which “makes the facets of the image sparkle” (p. 277). The choruses of voices that comprise their social circles influences their views of reading and motivate them to reimagine what it means to be a reader. If he can read the more complex texts he has been struggling with, he will have more in common with his peer group. Powerful motivation, indeed.

It would be irresponsible, however, to claim that social relationships represent a silver bullet that will solve the problem of motivating adolescents to read. Barney serves as a powerful example of how social relationships can also have, at best, a neutral influence and, at worst, a negative influence on students’ motivation to read. In spite of his admission that his friends, sometimes, encourage him to read by their interest in a text, Barney pointed out, “You have some people like right across the hallway [the gifted reading class] that would do anything to read. Then you got me and some of friends that would rather be doing something else besides reading.” Barney’s

response indicates that some social groups value reading, which may have a positive influence on the reading habits of the members of that group. However, his response also indicates that if reading is not valued within a social group, the members of that group will seek out alternatives to reading whenever possible. It is important to remember that no instructional tool or strategy is perfect.

Despite Barney’s perceptions that some members of his class rarely value reading, it is clear that social or affinity groups where reading is valued exist outside of the gifted English class. Author 2’s discussion with Barney’s classmate Nicole demonstrates that within her social group reading is valued. In fact, Nicole and her peers spend time talking about the books they are reading and that other groups probably consider them to be “bookworms.” Nicole stated that her friends “who love to read a lot of books” would do just about anything to read and do not “care about what other what other people think.” Felicia’s decisions to read (or not read) books were also swayed by seeing what her friends were reading. She claimed that if her friends “can’t put it (a book) down, it is probably very interesting. So, I want to find out what happens”. This idea of watching others to find out what is being read is critical for struggling readers as they want to read and be seen reading what their friends are reading. Nicole’s response does correspond with Barney’s line of thought and reinforces the notion that peer groups can have power over students’ perceptions, habits, and reading choices regardless of the ability level of the members of those groups. Peers have the ability to persuade students and help them see things that they did not initially imagine were possible. Bakhtin (1981) argued that “when someone else’s ideological discourse is internally persuasive for us and acknowledge by us, entirely different possibilities open up (p. 345). Our work with Barney, Felicia, Big Ron, and Nicole demonstrates the possibilities that are present when members of students’ social groups share positive perceptions of texts.

### Implications for Teaching

There are no easy answers to the question of how to help students who struggle with reading. This is a difficult task because individual children “are all different and they differ on myriad dimensions” (Compton-Lilly, 2008, p. 671). Students are complex beings whose lives and interests are constantly being influenced by their experiences. They are, in many ways, similar to words in that they are constantly being influenced by the context and contexts of their socially charged lives (Bakhtin, 1981). While the experiences of Felicia, Barney, Big Ron, and Nicole offer only a small view of the complexities of the influence of social relationships on students’ motivation to read,

they do serve as clear reminders that relationships matter. The MUSIC model of academic motivation (Jones, 2009) attends to the key role empowerment plays in engaging students in academic tasks. Jones highlighted the importance of providing opportunities for students to express and share their opinions. When students' social relationships are viewed as instructional tools that can enhance learning, many possibilities exist for engaging students in authentic instruction.

Social Networking tools like Goodreads (or Biblionasium for middle school), Instagram, and Twitter offer opportunities for teachers to empower students and make social relationships a central element of instruction. These tools are a natural way to make connections between the CCGPS and students' social relationships. For example, CCGPS standard ELAC8R10 requires students to read and comprehend various types of literature and ELAC8RL2 asks students to provide a theme, follow its development, and provide an objective summary. Both of these standards can be effectively addressed by capitalizing on the social aspect of reading. For instance, students can connect with plot, characters, and setting through the use of Instagram. They can read a text like *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1974), take a picture, write a succinct summary, tag the photo with a hashtag, and then follow the development of the theme as it winds its through the plot by following the hashtag and/or friends' posts. The key, then, is to make the dynamic nature of language and social relationships a central focus when thinking about how to address curricular demands in ways that will be responsive to students' individual needs.

### Coda

As avid readers, the word reading often brings to mind an image of curling up alone with a good book. But reading—even for avid readers—is not simply a solitary activity. It is inherently social. We talk about our favorite books with colleagues, make connections between protagonists and people we have met on the streets, and give books as Christmas presents to our loved ones. It can, however, be easy to overlook the important role social connections play in our reading habits when we think about our roles reading teachers and teacher educators. The reading process is complex and myriad factors influence each person's reading interests, habits, and abilities. With so many factors to attend to and the increasing demands on instructional time that accompany high-stakes testing, it's important for us to slow down and take stock of the things that can help us engage students in the tasks of learning to read and developing a life-long love of reading. The CCGPS require reading teachers in Georgia to ensure students read a variety of literature,

and social networks and affinity groups of all types can help teachers meet Georgia Department of Education mandates while also meeting what is, perhaps, the most important mandate—helping students find ways to fall in love with books.

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## Georgia Reading Association



# GOALS

- Empower members of the GRA and local councils to become effective leaders in the field of literacy.
- Provide quality reading education services to all Georgia educators.
- Recognize exemplary individuals, local, and state literacy efforts.
- Achieve maximum involvement of members at the local, state, and international levels to receive maximum benefits.
- Promote the goals and objectives of the International Reading Association of Georgia.



# How Can Teachers Motivate



## Reluctant Readers?

By DR. MAGGIE LEHMAN

### Abstract

Motivating students to read is an important aspect of being an elementary reading teacher. Five second graders and their teacher were involved in the original work that this article is based on. Through classroom observations and one-on-one interviews, this research

showed the importance of motivating reluctant readers. This article focuses on one student (Ben) in particular and his struggles with reading motivation. Through this lens of motivating reluctant readers, this article proceeds to share ideas of how classroom teachers can motivate reluctant readers in the classroom setting. Teachers can do a variety of things to motivate their students to read. One of the first things teachers need to do is get to know their students. Teachers also need to utilize a variety of motivating reading experiences to help motivate students as well as create an engaging and open literacy environment. A final way teachers can motivate their students to read is to implement motivating and relevant classroom activities. Utilizing these ideas to motivate readers will hopefully work to create lifelong learners.

It is reading center time in Miss Beckham's second grade classroom and her second grade students move from center to center at the sound of the timer. On this particular April morning, students are engrossed in activities revolving around their current author study of the nonfiction children's author Steve Jenks. Since Miss Beckham loves Steve Jenks' books, she has created an environment full of enthusiasm about this author study for a couple of months, which, in turn, created a very motivational environment. The twenty-seven students in this classroom eagerly read these books in various formats from partner reading to read-aloud to a small group scavenger hunt for information from a particular book. During this time, the students identified as struggling and requiring extra assistance in the form of small group reading instruction with the Title I teacher were even able to decode difficult words. For instance, Scully was so motivated to read these books that he was easily able to read the word 'threatened' without any outside assistance while reading one of these highly engaging books.

On a similar morning about five weeks later, the students are participating in the four daily centers. They read a story from the reading book, listen to a chapter book read by a parent volunteer, participate in a word work station that is largely based on the weekly spelling words, and choose between taking Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes and reading a book of choice. On this particular morning, Ben is displaying his lack of motivation by making choices to avoid reading. At the AR/free read station, he sits at the computer and seemingly pretends to take an AR quiz for more than 15 minutes instead of reading a book of his choice. About an hour later Ben makes a similar choice after completing a word game paper at the word work center. He chooses to talk to his friends rather than the expected scenario of reading a book. This situation occurred after he was lectured by his classroom teacher about the importance of reading

during the appropriate time of the day rather than talking to others and wandering the classroom.

These two scenarios point to the importance of the literacy environment, and student attitude and motivation to read in the reading classroom. A student's attitude toward reading as well as motivation to read often decide whether he/she chooses to read or do other activities instead, even if the child is a fluent reader (Lazarus & Callahan, 2000; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Reading attitude and motivation are also essential to the development and use of lifelong reading skills (Lazarus, & Callahan, 2000). Reading attitude and motivation may also impact a child's eventual ability due to motivation, engagement and practice factors (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995).

### What does the research say?

#### Motivation Theory and Motivation

Motivation theory works to explain why some readers are more likely to choose to read than others. Winnie and Marx (1989) explain how motivation theories account for three aspects of behavior. The first involves what a student chooses to do in a certain interaction or situation, such as choosing to raise his/her hand or avoiding eye contact during a class discussion. The next aspect of behavior is the "temperament of a person's behavior" (p. 224), such as being able to ignore distractions and the care taken in completing assignments. The final aspect of behavior mentioned by Winnie and Marx is persistence. This concept is related to the time allowed to complete a task versus the amount of time spent completing it. For instance, some students may spend a lot of time creating a word web or concept map while others spend as little time as possible. Since motivation is such an important aspect of engaged, successful reading, these behavioral concepts need to be taken into consideration.

Consistent with the above explanation, Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) suggest that "reading motivation is the individual's personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading" (p. 405). Guthrie and Wigfield explain some key motivations for reading, including having learning or performance goals, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and social motivations. Learning or performance goals include the reasons why a person chooses to read, such as the desire to learn more about a particular topic or wanting to outperform others. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are key to the desire to read. Intrinsic motivation is an inward need to read for the sake of reading or learning more about a topic. Extrinsic motivation is the desire to read in order to receive an external reward, such as recognition or a trinket of some kind. Students with a high self-efficacy towards reading "see difficult reading

tasks as challenging and work diligently to master them, using their cognitive strategies productively" (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 408). Poor self-efficacy towards reading results in a lack of motivation to read. This is especially present in students who may have struggled in learning how to read and still think of themselves as poor readers even though they are reading on a much higher level and seem to enjoy reading some books. Social motivations for reading make children want to read in order to interact with their peers about the book. All of these motivational constructs help to explain why some readers are more motivated to read than others.

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) also point out that attitude is different from motivation. Attitude refers to whether or not a student likes to perform a particular task, such as reading for recreational reasons and reading for academic reasons. Motivation involves the reader's goals and desires to read. A highly motivated reader will choose to read at any given time.

A student's motivation to read and self-efficacy towards reading are enhanced when they are given the tools to complete the task successfully (Guthrie et al., 2004; Lutz, Guthrie, & Davis, 2006). Strategy instruction, such as teaching students comprehension strategies, helps students gain confidence in their ability to read and comprehend the text. For example, teaching students to ask questions while reading encourages students to stop once in a while to check and make sure that they are understanding what they have read, which gives them more confidence in what they are doing and learning.

Guthrie et al. (2004) shared some important aspects of classrooms that supported intrinsic motivation to read, including "a) content goals for instruction, b) choice and autonomy support, c) interesting texts, and d) collaboration for learning" (p. 404). These relatively simple classroom practices have a great impact on students' motivation to read and to continue reading. Cole (2012), shared some similar classroom practices that aid in the development of students' intrinsic motivation mechanisms:

- Teacher modeling interest
- Sincere praise
- Collaborative learning
- Student success
- Teacher caring
- Using students' interests
- Giving choices
- Decreasing rewards
- Meaningful work
- Allowing autonomy
- Appropriate challenge
- Informative, not judgmental, feedback (p. 71)

By utilizing these mechanisms, teachers are able to motivate students to want to read and hopefully become lifelong readers.

Perhaps one of the most striking things to note about motivation theory is the fact that this essential part of the reading process was not included as one of the pillars detailed by the National Reading Panel (2000). Motivation is what drives students to read for pleasure and enjoyment and basically become a lifelong reader, but it was not noteworthy enough to be considered by the panel as part of these essential aspects of good reading instruction.

### Literacy Environment

According to Cambourne (2000), a literacy environment is a complicated concept, which primarily includes the aspects of the physical set-up of the classroom, the human behaviors, and the programs available in the classroom setting. These aspects work together to create an engaging environment that promotes positive attitudes toward reading as well as a desire or motivation to read.

The principal aspect of the physical environment is that it should be motivationally print-rich in both the relevance of the print adorning the walls as well as the materials provided to the children. This print should have a function within the classroom setting rather than simply serving as decorations. This print can include materials that guide daily activities, such as directions for completing the morning routine, and teacher-made charts, such as a list of ideas for how to start a new writing project. Another important idea for a good literacy environment is to provide children with plenty of literature from a variety of genres, including fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, and traditional literature, and types, including picture books, chapter books, graphic novels, and magazines on a range of ability levels. This variety of literature is an essential part of the literacy environment (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey & Del Noro, 2011) and encourages the intrinsic motivation discussed above, including providing books related to students' interests and allowing students the opportunity to choose their own books to read. The environment should also include areas for large group reading, such as a large rug, where the teacher and students could meet as a class for instruction and large-group read-aloud. This area is an essential part of a motivating classroom. During the large group time, the teacher is able to promote motivation by sharing her interest in reading as well as introducing students to new and challenging books.

Interactions, teacher behaviors and verbal explanations also impact the literacy environment and

student motivation. Allington (2002) explained that the classrooms he considered exemplary "encouraged, modeled, and supported lots of talk across the school day" (p. 755). Allowing students to talk and interact with each other in positive ways revolving around reading and writing helps the students see the value in reading and writing while learning to value the opinions of others in a supportive environment. Capitalizing on teachable moments throughout a lesson is a valuable way to promote literacy and language development (Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley, 1999; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998). Positive interactions between the teacher and students are also an important part of the literacy environment. This includes the kind of feedback that students receive, which "should focus on what the student did correctly, as well as what needs to be done to improve future performance" (Konold, Miller & Konold, 2005, p. 66). As mentioned by Cole (2012), receiving informative feedback that is not judgmental is an intrinsically motivating mechanism that helps students want to continue reading to "get it right." Questioning is also a notable aspect of the human behavior feature of a positive literacy environment. Asking open-ended and higher order questions helps students to develop better literacy skills and achieve at higher levels (Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley, 1999; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998).

The final aspect of the classroom literacy environment that Cambourne (2000) mentioned includes the literacy programs and routines that are implemented in the classroom setting. Implementing explicit and systematic instruction in literacy is an important aspect of the literacy environment (Cambourne, 2000; Morrow, Tracey, Woo & Pressley, 1999; Wharton-McDonald et al., 1997; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley & Hampston, 1998). Experiencing reading in a variety of formats, including whole group (read aloud and comprehension strategy instruction), small group (guided reading, skills groups, and/or continuation of strategy instruction), and one-on-one (with teacher and individual reading) is also an important aspect of the routines that should be implemented into the classroom structure. Planning motivating activities is another important aspect of the literacy environment. These activities engage students in the classroom literacy environment, and help them to want to learn to read and write.

### Attitude

Lazarus and Callahan (2000) explained the importance of reading attitude, asserting that, "Reading attitude fulfills a pivotal role in the development and use of lifelong reading skills" (p. 217). Throughout the last few decades, researchers have explored aspects

of reading. In their comprehensive study of reading attitude, McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) studied a national sample of over 18,000 students from 229 schools in 95 districts across 38 states. They found a decline in attitude toward both academic and recreational reading from grades one through six. The researchers also found a relationship between negative recreational reading attitude and reading ability. Students who struggled with reading shared a worse attitude toward reading than students who were successful readers. In contrast, Lazarus and Callahan (2000) found that students identified with a learning disability who received instruction in a resource room did not fully share in this negative trend. These researchers found a declining attitude toward recreational reading across grade levels, but attitudes toward academic reading remained steady from the primary to intermediate grades.

Williams and Hall's (2010) study reiterated some key concepts about reading attitude and the motivation to read independently. Through the use of simple interviews, these researchers found support for the importance of allowing students time to read independently. This assertion comes from the fact that students reported that they learned more and became better readers by reading independently rather than being read to by their teacher or another adult. Students also indicated an understanding of reading being important to school success, as well as to later success in life. Reading as a source of entertainment was one indication of these students' attitudes toward reading. More than half of the participants shared that they read after school indicating their positive attitudes toward reading and a strong motivation to read independently. Interestingly enough, the National Reading Panel also did not include the importance of promoting independent reading or reading at home.

Williams and Hall (2010) also indicated the importance of teachers explaining to students the purpose of a teacher read aloud. Teachers can model comprehension strategies through a think aloud, but students need to understand why that is happening. Teachers should explicitly explain to students that listening to fluent reading can help them become better readers. Reading aloud is more than just a time filler so students need to understand the purpose behind this essential reading activity. This explanation and eventual understanding will lead to students feeling motivated and wanting to try the comprehension strategy during their own independent reading.

Sainsbury and Schagen (2004) found an interesting phenomenon when comparing data from 1998 to that obtained in 2003 in the United Kingdom. They studied students who were in years four and six in

school, and discovered that students reported having more confidence in reading and needing less support in 2003 than in 1998. However, these students were also less likely to enjoy reading in 2003 as compared to 1998. These results were confirmed by the fact that new literacy legislation changed instruction delivery following the 1998 survey. These survey results indicate that students are losing their motivation to read because of literacy legislation and classroom instruction changes. As Cole (2012) explained, "A focus on tests and test preparation can push aside classroom events that support student interests, self-selected reading, and significant time to read" (p. 71). Instead of creating literate, life-long readers, we are creating alliterate students who only read when they "have" to. Teachers need to find ways to motivate all students in the classroom setting despite the challenges of current legislation and testing requirements.

### The Research Setting

This research occurred in a major Midwestern city. The researcher observed five focal students who were struggling readers for eight weeks in the spring of their second grade year. The data sources included observational field notes of the five struggling readers during class sessions as well as interviews with both the students and the teacher.

### Attitude Toward Reading: Self-Reported and Observational

For the purpose of this article, I will focus on one focal student in particular. Ben (self-chosen pseudonym) showed a bit of a mismatch between his stated feelings toward reading and his actions in the classroom setting. During our first interview, Ben explained to me that he feels good about reading and likes to read a lot as well as explaining, "I like to read because you never know what's going to happen next in a story and if you read and read and read then you know everything" (interview data, 4-29-11). In contrast to this apparent liking of reading, Ben was often observed avoiding reading. These avoidance behaviors included talking after finishing his work on 5 occasions, going to the bathroom/getting a drink when he was supposed to be working or reading on five occasions, and having a book out without actively reading on 3 occasions. Ben's thoughts on the importance of reading were also a bit concerning. Ben shared that he feels that reading is important "because you need to know to read to go in grades and finish grades and just go up into another grade" (interview data, 4-29-11). This view of reading shows his view of its importance in the school setting, but this view will likely not lead to Ben being a lifelong reader. At this stage he was not seeing the importance of reading for enjoyment.

On two occasions Miss Beckham intervened to help Ben choose books of interest. On the first occasion, Miss Beckham talked to Ben about the importance of reading books all the way to the end in order to become a better reader. Miss Beckham helped Ben choose a Magic Tree House book to read that he seemed to enjoy reading for the next few days (field notes, 4-13-11). The problem was that once Ben finished reading a book he had trouble choosing a new book on his own. By the end of my time in the classroom, Miss Beckham was working with Ben again to try and figure out a book to read. During a conversation about Ben's avoidance of reading one Monday afternoon in the middle of May, Miss Beckham discovered that some of Ben's issues stem from the fact that his mother "made" him read in the evenings and he found it to be boring. Miss Beckham discussed with him the kinds of books that he likes to read and Ben shared that he liked reading books about boys being silly. Miss Beckham found some books on the bookshelf and Ben chose to start reading the Big Nate series by Lincoln Pierce (field notes, 5-18-11). Miss Beckham's actions helped Ben become a more active and motivated reader over the last couple of weeks of my time in their classroom. This actually leads to a major issue facing teachers. How can teachers help students become more engaged readers in an effort to improve their attitudes toward reading and motivation to read? The next section will examine what teachers can do to help students improve in both attitude and action.

### What can teachers do?

#### Get to Know Your Students

Getting to know your students involves much more than just knowing their names. Teachers need to learn about their students' attitudes toward reading, motivation to read, likes and dislikes, family background, academics, and literacy goals. In order to help a child grow and develop as a reader a teacher should learn about how a student feels about reading and him/herself as a reader (Strickland & Walker, 2004). This can be done through a written survey, or a simple interview where the teacher sits down and has a conversation with the student.

**Elementary reading attitude survey.** McKenna and Keer's (1990) reading attitude survey is a validated and reliable way to learn more about how students feel about both academic and recreational aspects of reading. This survey helps teachers develop an understanding of students' views on books, reading, and reading-related activities that occur both during school and at other times.

**Motivation to read profile-revised.** The motivation to read profile-revised (MRP-R) (Malloy, Marinak, Gambrell, & Mazzoni, 2014) gives teachers insights

into what drives their students to choose to read. This profile was originally created in 1996, but it has been revised to reflect recent changes in the literacy landscape, including linguistic and cultural changes. The MRP-R includes a survey portion that can be administered to the whole class and includes ten questions designed to measure how students value reading and ten questions that measure a student's self-concept of him/herself as a reader. This tool also includes an open-ended conversational interview that can be accessed in a digital form for easier recording.

**Personal interest inventory.** Teachers can ask both students and parents to share more information about the student and their family background in the form of a written survey. A simple survey completed by students allows teachers to learn more about what their students like and don't like. A survey completed by parents during an open house night allows teachers to learn more about a child's family life and background experiences.

The information obtained from these sorts of surveys helps the teacher choose materials of interest to be shared with students as read-alouds, placed on the bookshelf and used in instruction that are also appropriate to use with the child/children. The information gathered through these methods also helps teachers plan for instruction. Developing a knowledge and understanding of a student's family background and home situation is also a central aspect of getting to know your students. This background knowledge allows a teacher a better understanding and helps him/her to plan accordingly.

#### Utilize a Variety of Motivating Reading Experiences

The simple fact that reading helps students learn to read is often overlooked in classrooms. Students need a large variety of reading experiences when they are acquiring the difficult task of learning how to read and start developing their individual self-concept about reading. Miss Beckham worked hard to provide her second graders with a variety of reading opportunities each week, including small group reading, buddy reading, independent reading, and teacher read-aloud.

**Guided reading.** Guided reading and other forms of small group reading allow the teacher to focus on specific skills while working with a smaller groups of students. It is essential that teachers work to find materials for guided reading that will interest the students and make reading seem relevant. Teachers also need to choose a variety of books to read with students.

**Buddy reading.** During buddy reading, two students are reading together. This can occur side-by-side, knee-to-knee or any other format that the teacher deems appropriate. This sort of reading experience allows more students to read a limited number of books, such as during an author study, in addition to allowing the children to reread a selection in a different format with the help of a peer.

**Independent reading.** Independent reading is an essential aspect of a child's reading development. The opportunity to read a book of choice for an extended period of time can be invaluable to a reader at any stage of development. During this time, teachers can take the opportunity to help students choose texts that are appropriate for both the child's ability as well as interest level. Student choice is an essential aspect in helping students become engaged and motivated to read (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Senn, 2012; Williams, & Hall, 2010). Students need to have the opportunity to choose books as well as read them on a regular basis during the school day. One way to help students choose a variety of books is to give them a self-discovery bookmark that lists a variety of genres so students can keep track of the different genres they have read and enjoyed. This bookmark promotes the concept of choice while encouraging children to read a variety of books (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006).

**Teacher read-aloud.** A well-chosen read aloud book can greatly help students to become excited about the topic at hand as well as improve their comprehension skills, build vocabulary, develop an understanding of what fluent reading sounds like, and simply enjoy reading for the pleasure of reading (Cecil, 2011). When choosing these read-aloud books, teachers also need to consider what will appeal to all students, especially the boys. Teachers have a tendency to choose books that they, as the teacher and usually female, enjoy. Teachers need to work to share a large variety of books, including non-fiction, graphic novels, magazines, and other materials that appeal to boys more. Because teachers usually do not share graphic novels, web sites, newspapers and magazines, boys tend to believe they are not appropriate reading options (Senn, 2012).

### Create an Engaging and Open Literacy Environment

The environment and expectations created within a classroom will also affect a child's attitude toward reading, ideas about reading, and desire to participate in the act of reading. What a teacher does to create her/his classroom literacy environment is essential to the development of all readers in that classroom.

**Access to a large variety of books.** Children need to

have access to all kinds of books, including a variety of genres and formats. Fiction books should include all types of genres, such as traditional literature, fantasy, poetry, mystery, realistic fiction, historic fiction, and multicultural books. Nonfiction books should include biography books and informational books about a large variety of topics in both the science and social studies areas. Teachers and librarians need to be open-minded about the kinds of books that are "appropriate" for reading. In order to promote reading among boys, teachers, parents, and librarians need to help boys understand that graphic novels, newspapers, magazines, and web sites are all appropriate forms of reading. Senn (2012) explained that boys "enjoy texts that can be collected (books in a series, baseball cards, etc.), have visual interest (graphic novels, websites), are succinct (newspaper or magazine articles), relate to their own lives, and are funny or rebellious (comics)" (p. 217). Some examples of these kinds of books include: the Captain Underpants series, Jeff Smith has authored many graphic novels students may enjoy, Time for Kids, and National Geographic Kids are two magazines appropriate for all students, and Jack Ganto has written many books that boys can relate to, and Marvel comics offer digital versions and a limited number of print versions of their comics at <http://marvel.com/comics>.

**Create a "guys read" area.** This suggestion is based on the work of Jon Scieszka. On his web site, guysread.com, he explains the importance of embracing the idea that boys are different and have different needs when it comes to reading. He suggests including informational books by Seymour Simon, funny books by David Pilkey, books by Jack Ganto, some graphic novels, magazines, and newspapers. The guys read web site includes numerous suggestions of books that can be shared with reluctant readers.

**Supportive teacher actions.** Supporting all readers as they work to develop their skills is another way to create a literate environment. Students need to feel that they can take risks in order to grow and develop their reading skills. In this vain, praise and encouragement need to be specific and direct. Simply telling a child that she/he did a "good job" while reading does not help the child grow and learn as much as telling the child that he/she did a good job of self-correcting his/her mistake or using the surrounding words to figure out the unknown words. Children need to know what they are doing right to continue to experiment and try new things in their reading development.

### Implement Motivating and Relevant Classroom Activities

The activities that occur in the classroom setting, both planned and unplanned, can have a huge impact on

a child's literacy development. It is important to make reading and literacy a motivating experience for all students. Some ways to do this include showing boys that men read too, making reading relevant to their lives and interests, being accepting of boys' unique taste in books and reading materials, involving others in the efforts to reach boys, and explicitly teaching important literacy strategies.

**Boys need male role models.** Finding ways to motivate reluctant boy readers can be difficult for female teachers. Senn (2012) and McFann (2004) both reiterate the importance of the male role model in helping to motivate boys to read. One way to help motivate the boys is to start a guest reader program where male role models are invited to read a favorite book of their choice to the class. These guest readers can be parents, athletes from local universities or high schools, or other men who can help boys see the importance of reading. The bottom line is that the boys need to see the value of reading so that they will read.

**Make reading relevant.** Students need to understand the purpose for the work they are asked to complete in the classroom setting. Boys are more engaged in reading a text if they may learn something from it or if after reading the book they will write a book review for their classmates. Allowing boys to read about topics relevant to their lives and interests is essential to their motivation.

**Be accepting and perceptive.** As I mentioned earlier, boys learn and develop as readers differently than girls. Teachers may need to re-evaluate what they consider to be appropriate. Boys need to read books involving action, adventure and possibly violence (as long as it is age appropriate) and teachers need to allow boys these sorts of reading experiences.

**Involve others.** Parents can be a teacher's greatest allies, but parents also need help and support in knowing and fully understanding what their role is in supporting their child's education. Teachers can support parents in their role by sharing information with them. This can include encouraging fathers to read to their children as much as mothers do. Teachers can also support the literacy of families by sending home literacy bags that contain books and writing materials based on a theme.

**Strategy instruction.** Many students, especially struggling and reluctant readers, need teachers to explicitly teach them reading strategies. This explicit teaching requires authentic text and proven decoding and comprehension strategies without the need for a worksheet. In conjunction with this explicit teaching, students need to be involved in motivating activities

that make them want to participate and learn from what they are doing in the classroom setting. Asking open-ended questions that require higher-order thinking skills is another way to help keep students motivated and wanting to read and learn more in the classroom setting. These questions also help to promote close reading that requires deeper thinking. The easiest thing that teachers can do to utilize classroom happenings to promote better reading attitudes is to take advantage of teachable moments. This requires teachers to stay in the moment with their students so that they can take advantage of the little things that students do that can be used to help them learn more about reading and the things that they are doing correctly in the reading context.

### Concluding Thoughts

As described in the opening scenarios, classroom activities can serve as a way to both encourage and stifle student motivation to read. Ben became engaged and motivated to read when he was able to find something of interest. He benefited from his teacher taking the time to learn more about him as a reader and helping him to find a book of interest. His experiences illustrate the importance of teachers helping children find books of interest as well as a positive literacy environment.

Children who have a good attitude toward reading and are motivated to read will spend more time reading, which leads to higher achievement. The hope is that these readers will also become lifelong readers (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006). Working to engage all learners will help to lead to the ultimate goal of promoting lifelong learners.

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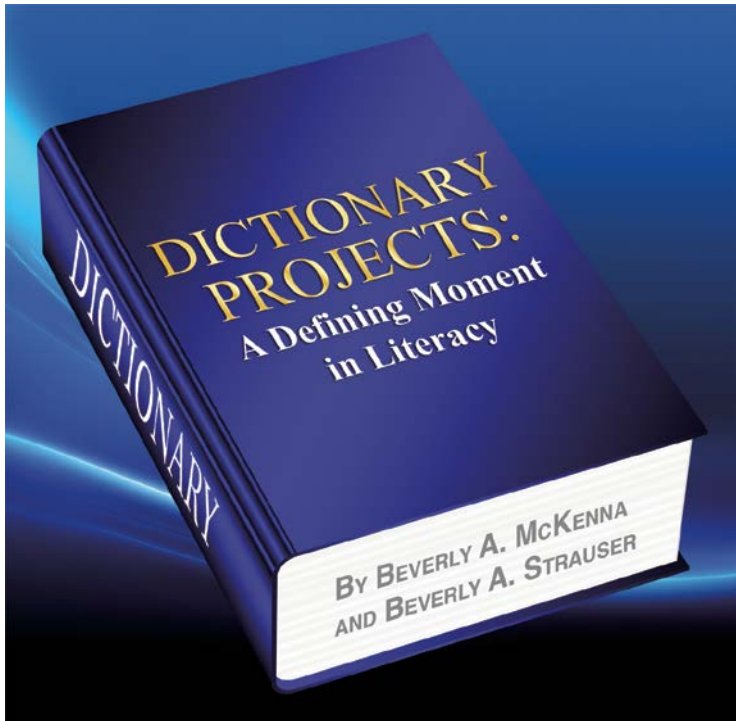
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The scene is the auditorium of a high-poverty school, where every third-grader has been assembled. When a visitor explains that each child will receive a dictionary of his or her very own, looks of surprise turn to joy. Most live in homes without a dictionary. Regrettably, many have never owned a book.

This scene plays out again and again each spring as we visit schools in Chatham County. After years of providing this service, we can think of no way of promoting literacy that is more visible or more rewarding. It is a simple program that teachers across the state can easily replicate in their schools at virtually no cost. In this article, we explain how.

### How It All Started

Annie Plummer, better known as “The Dictionary Lady,” began giving away dictionaries in 1992 after noticing that many of the students in her neighborhood walked to Garrison Elementary without any books (Ward, 1999). At the time, Garrison served children from three housing projects and two homeless shelters. Annie’s ingenuity and determination helped her develop a workable strategy that over time she extended first to other Savannah-area schools and eventually, through a network of family and friends, to schools in other cities.

Though Annie Plummer died in 1999, her work goes on. In 1995, her ideas inspired volunteer Mary French to found The Dictionary Project, a nonprofit based in Charleston, South Carolina. This organization has helped launch projects across the nation and beyond. To date, more than 18 million dictionaries have been given to third graders (Dictionary Project, 2014).

### How You Can Get Started

Undertaking a dictionary project is not difficult, though it helps to be organized! We suggest the following steps based on our experiences over a number of years.

1. *Decide the scope of your involvement.* You can involve any number of schools, but our advice is to start with your own. After you’ve gone through the process once, you’ll have a much better idea of what is required. You can then decide whether to broaden the scope to other schools in your district.
2. *Gain the support of school administrators and third-grade teachers.* Do not simply assume that the obvious benefits of the project will eliminate the need to apprise teachers and administrators of how the project works. Although resistance is unlikely, your colleagues need to be in the loop.
3. *Seek permission from the district.* It is a good idea to gain district approval as well, though the principal can make a request on your behalf.

In our experience, district-level administrators are enthusiastic supporters of the project. In fact, do not be surprised if they urge you to include all third graders from the outset.

4. *Locate funding.* There are several options for obtaining the funds necessary to purchase the dictionaries. Partnering with a local service group is a possibility we have found to be particularly effective. Two organizations that have shown willingness in the past are the local Rotary and the area Pilot Club, an organization devoted to brain-based disorders. Another possibility is the parent organization that serves your school. Still another is one or more of the school’s local business partners. Occasionally, a single benefactor may wish to underwrite all of the costs.

5. *Plan logistics.* Once you’ve decided on the scope of the project and have secured the funds to carry it out, you’ll need to think through the process from start to finish. Make a to-do list that includes the following:

- Determine the number of copies you will need, estimating a bit high. Obtaining a few extra copies will ensure that no child is left out.
- Place an order. We recommend ordering through The Dictionary Project, which makes it possible to obtain dictionaries at very low cost—just \$1.25 at this writing.
- Arrange for delivery. This means working out arrangements with the principal and third-grade teachers. The event could be as elaborate as an assembly or as low key as going from room to room. But everyone involved needs to know what will occur and when.

6. *Seek publicity.* When all of the arrangements have

been made, contact local media. They are often happy to run a public interest story, and the publicity is good for the school. Before doing so, however, be sure to notify the principal.

A final touch could involve placing a sticker in each dictionary to credit the funding organization. It might contain an encouraging message as well, a practice started by Annie Plummer herself. When children opened their dictionaries, they discovered a handwritten note from Annie: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste. I challenge you not to waste yours."

Additional information is available from the Dictionary Project, 581 Flannery Place, Mt. Pleasant, SC 29466. Call 843-856-2706 or visit their website at [dictionaryproject.org](http://dictionaryproject.org).

### A Final Word

"Sadly," Remondi and Rasco (2013) observe, "two out of three of the 16 million children currently living in poverty in the United States have no books to call their own" (p. 5). Needless to say, this problem is not unique to the U.S., and the idea of combatting it by providing children with free books is hardly new. Warwick Elley's Book Flood program (1975) provided thousands of books to children in developing countries. Closer to home, Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) has given free books to children since 1966. But there is still much to do and there is room for many initiatives. Providing third graders with dictionaries targets a key inflection point in their development as readers. It gives them a resource they can return to again and again. It is a means for each of us to think globally while acting locally. And it makes a difference.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**KATIE STOVER** is an Assistant Professor in the Education Department at Furman University in Greenville, SC. She has authored a number of publications on literacy instruction and literacy coaching in journals such as *The Reading Teacher*, *The Middle School Journal*, and *The Journal of Early Childhood Research*. Dr. Stover can be reached at: [katie.stover@furman.edu](mailto:katie.stover@furman.edu)

**MARYANN MRAZ** is a Professor in the Reading and Elementary Education Department at the University of North Carolina Charlotte (UNCC). She has served as a board member of the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers (ALER) and the author of over 60 books, articles, chapters, and instructional materials on literacy education. Dr. Mraz can be reached at: [Memraz@uncc.edu](mailto:Memraz@uncc.edu)

**DR. MARIE HOLBEIN**, Professor of Teaching, Learning, and Leadership at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, Co-Directs a Teacher Quality Partnership grant funded by U.S. Department of Education. Dr. Holbein has presented and published internationally, nationally, and regionally on topics related to literacy and professional development schools. Dr. Holbein can be reached at: [mholbein@kennesaw.edu](mailto:mholbein@kennesaw.edu)

**DR. JENNIFER FARIST** is the gifted coordinator at Mountain View Elementary in Gilmer County. She has presented at local, state, and national conferences. Her research interests include literacy, benefits of social learning, and meeting the needs of gifted learners. Dr. Farist can be reached at: [jfarist@gmail.com](mailto:jfarist@gmail.com)

**EMILY PENDERGRASS** taught elementary and middle school students for eleven years. While working alongside middle school students, she finished her Ph.D. in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia. While at UGA, Emily worked extensively with the Red Clay Writing Project, part of the National Writing Project. Currently, Emily teaches courses in Learning, Diversity, and Urban Studies and Secondary English Education at Vanderbilt University. Additionally, Emily works closely with the local public schools in literacy coaching and facilitating professional development workshops. Dr. Pendergrass can be reached at: [e.pendergrass@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:e.pendergrass@vanderbilt.edu)

**TREVOR THOMAS STEWART** is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education and the Program Leader for English Education at Virginia Tech. He received his Ph.D. in Language & Literacy Education and a Certificate in Interdisciplinary Qualitative Studies from the University of Georgia (2010). Prior to becoming a teacher educator, Dr. Stewart worked as a high school English teacher in southwestern North Carolina. His research interests include the influences of educational policy and high-stakes testing on English teachers' instructional practices, making creativity a central element of instruction, and the intersection between language and culture. Dr. Stewart can be reached at: [ttstew@vt.edu](mailto:ttstew@vt.edu)

**DR. MAGGIE LEHMAN** is an Assistant Professor of Reading and Early Childhood Education at Georgia Southwestern State University. She holds a Doctor of Education in Literacy from the University of Cincinnati. She has taught grades 2, 4, 5 and 6 as a general classroom teacher in Ohio as well as six years of experience teaching undergraduate students both live and online, and three years of experience teaching graduate students. Dr. Lehman's research interests include student motivation to read, student interactions, and how preservice teachers view reading and the teaching of reading.

**BEVERLY MCKENNA** is a graduate of the University of Arkansas. She has taught both kindergarten and third grade in Missouri and Kansas. She is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Georgia Southern University, where she supervises pre-service teachers. Her volunteer service work with Pilot International, a service organization that provides support to people with brain related illnesses, has centered on literacy and the Dictionary Project in particular

**BEVERLY STRAUSER** is a former elementary school teacher, computer literacy teacher, and gifted education teacher. She is currently an Instructor at Georgia Southern University in the Department of Teaching and Learning teaching and training pre-service teachers.

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## GEORGIA JOURNAL OF READING CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

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As editors of the *Georgia Journal of Reading*, a refereed journal of the Georgia Reading Association, we invite those interested in improving reading and language arts instruction at all levels to submit manuscripts for publication in future issues. *The Georgia Journal of Reading* is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall.

We request articles that are grounded in current theory and research, book reviews, or creative teaching strategies that address all levels from elementary to college. Three types of manuscripts are currently being solicited.

### **Full-length Articles**

These articles should deal with research, current issues, and recent trends in reading or literacy programs. Appropriate topics for the Journal include project descriptions, research or theoretical reports that address pedagogical implications or issues in reading education at the local, state or national level. Preference is given to articles focusing on topics that impact Georgia's students.

### **Articles for the Exchange Column**

Articles for this column should describe creative teaching ideas and strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. These articles are shorter than full-length and may or may not require references.

### **Book and Resource Reviews**

Reviews should describe and critique children's books, professional books, or reading resources that are appropriate for use by teachers and reading professionals. Complete bibliographic information, the address of the publisher, and the cost of the resource should be included.

### **Manuscript Guidelines**

Manuscripts should be submitted electronically in Microsoft Word, double-spaced, and the format should conform to the guidelines presented in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th Ed.). Manuscripts should not exceed twenty double-spaced typed pages. The author's name, full address, telephone number, email address, and school/affiliation, and a brief statement on professional experience should be submitted on a separate cover page. The author's name or any reference that would enable a reviewer to know who the author is should not appear on the manuscript. Manuscripts will not be sent out for peer review until this information is provided. All manuscripts will undergo a blind review by at least two members of the editorial board. Decisions will be made within 8-12 weeks of publication of the journal for which the submission was made. Only electronic submissions will be accepted.

### **Please submit all manuscripts to the co-editors:**

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[grasubmission@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:grasubmission@georgiasouthern.edu)

**Lina B. Soares, Co-Editor**  
**Georgia Journal of Reading,**  
**Georgia Southern University**

**Christine A. Draper, Co-Editor**  
**Georgia Journal of Reading,**  
**Georgia Southern University**